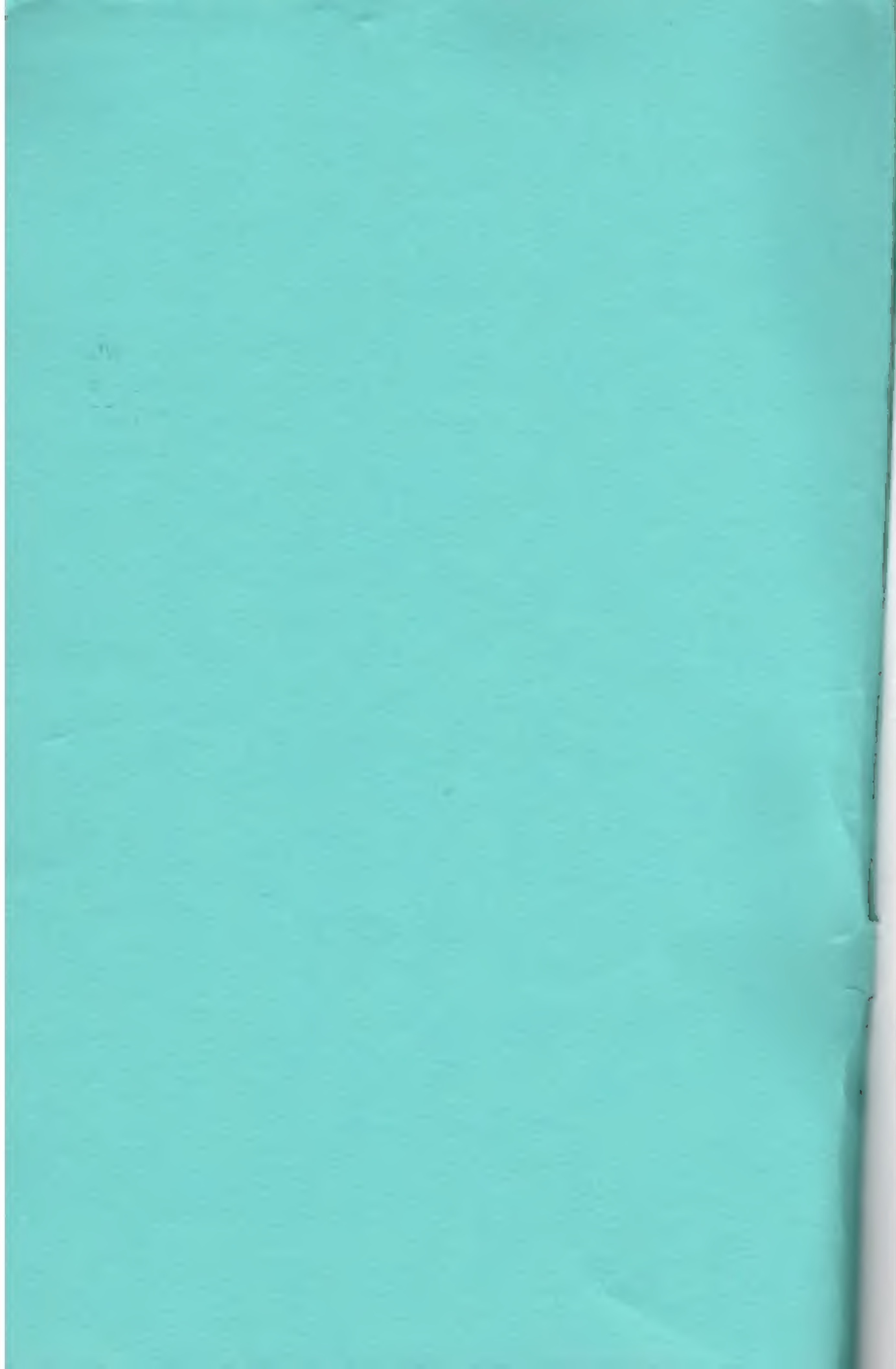


KNIGHTBEAT





KNIGHTBEAT VOL. V

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EDITOR: Barbara Fister-Liltz
PRE-PRODUCTION: Melissa Keck

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BETRAYED

by Bettie J. Brown

The full moon shimmered, an enormous, white diamond against the black velvet of the night sky. He had always loved the night. Its power filled him, heightening his senses. He was aware of the softest sounds, faintest smells. The sensations swept over him, making him feel so...*ALIVE*. Darkness wrapped 'round him, like a cool, soft blanket; making him invisible to ordinary mortals. *HUMANS*, such easy prey for his kind. Their weakness made them beneath contempt.

The woman at his feet never stirred. She was past movement of any kind. He cherished the memory of her death. Her warm blood coursed through him. The ecstasy of the kill sang in his body. He could still taste her blood in his mouth. "Oh, how I love the night!," he said aloud. Flinging his arms wide, he threw his head back and roared his laughter toward the moon.

The dream had been so vivid. He could still feel the cold on his skin; hear the sounds; smell the faint aroma of iron in her blood. The taste of her. He quickly put a fist to his lips. "Oh, my God!" There was blood on his hand. "This can't be, it was only a dream...wasn't it?" Try as he might, Nick couldn't remember leaving his apartment. But, being a detective, he couldn't ignore the evidence. He was lying on his bed, fully clothed, with blood still on his lips, its taste in his mouth. This had never happened before, not in eight hundred years of existence. Why now, when he was so close to becoming human? Why now?! It just doesn't make any sense. I haven't killed anyone in a hundred years. This can't be happening, he thought to himself.

Nick dived for the telephone, as if he was a drowning man and it a safety line. "Come on, come on!" he screamed into the receiver.

"Hello?" Natalie's voice said finally over the phone. "Hello," she repeated in a puzzled tone. He hung up.

"What do I say to her? What can I say? Hi, Nat, this is Nick, I may have killed someone last night. How are things going at work?" Maybe he was wrong. Maybe it *was* only a dream. But the evidence of his clothes nagged at him and would not go away. Why was he fully clothed? Why couldn't he remember going out?

The telephone's loud ring startled him out of his reverie. "Nick? Nick, are you there? It's me, Nat. Did you just call me? Nick, if you're there, will you please pick up the phone..." There was a long pause, then she hung up.

His mind was racing. I couldn't talk to anyone right now, Nat, Nick thought to himself. What could I say?

Nick could practically see the raised eyebrow on the desk sergeant when he called in sick, a rarity for him. Captain Cohen took a dim view of sick time. But he was certain he sounded quite convincing as a flu victim. It didn't matter. He didn't trust himself around humans. Not even Natalie. What if he were going mad and attacked her, or Schanke? The thrill he had felt when he took that girl, the girl in his...dream, was still with him. "I'll wait until sunset, then I'm going to see Janette. Janette will know if something like this has happened before." He was as desperate as he sounded.

The usual crowd, mixed with a few adventurous humans, was at the Raven tonight. Over in the corner sat Janette, a spider in her web, awaiting her unwary victim. Her black hair and ruby red lips had always reminded him of a black widow. His past relationship with her had proven the accuracy of the comparison.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite..." she slowly eyed him up and down, "...dick." She ended with a saucy look. "What brings you here this dark and stormy night? Don't you have bad guys to catch, or something like that?"

He abruptly grabbed her by the hands, pulling them to his chest. "Cut the crap, Janette. We have to talk seriously."

"Ever the gentleman, I see," she said drawing back from him, at the same time waving off the bouncer coming to her rescue. "Shall we withdraw to the back room?" She led him into the room with which he was all too familiar. It was here, underneath its mirrored ceiling and on one of its red cushioned pillars, that he'd almost killed before. A very appropriate setting for this particular conversation.

"All right, what's so important you must take me away from my business?" Janette asked, with arms folded and eyes flashing darkly.

Where do I begin? he thought to himself. He felt quite the fool now. "Janette...Janette," he started, and stopped.

"Yes, Nikola, I'm waiting." She took in his hunched shoulders and lost puppy dog expression. Something was indeed wrong. "What's happened, Nikola?" This time there was genuine concern in her voice. "What's wrong, *mon amour*?" She reached out to touch him, but he turned away.

"I've been having...dreams, Janette," he said quietly. "Some very disturbing dreams."

She waited patiently for him to elaborate, then she prompted, "Surely, there's more involved than mere dreams, Nikola. You're troubled. I can feel it in the bond between us." She was aware of his lost feeling, his belief that she was his only hope. "What has occurred to make you feel so...*alone*, Nikola?"

"It all began about a month ago. I would wake up and find things in a different place than I remembered. My watch, the shoes I'd worn the night before...little things. Then the dreams began. I would have these vivid dreams of going out at night, stalking prey but not killing. I'd never made a kill. At least, not until last night." His expression changed. "It felt so good to kill again. I'd forgotten how intoxicating it could be. How palatable human blood was. *IFELT SO ALIVE!!!*" Nick stopped. He suddenly realized Janette was looking at him strangely. He knew how he must have sounded. It frightened him, but he continued his story. "This time when I woke up, I was fully clothed with blood still on my lips and no memory of having left my apartment. I came here looking for answers, Janette. I was hoping you could help me find out what's happening. Maybe tell me LaCroix's been up to his old tricks." He looked at her hopefully.

"It's not LaCroix. It's not his style."

"I was afraid you'd say that. To be truthful, I don't think it's LaCroix either, just a knee-jerk reaction to blame him for everything that goes wrong in my life. You've got to admit, he was usually the cause of my troubles. But not this time, not this time. Am I going crazy, Janette?" There, he'd finally said it aloud. He couldn't bring himself to look into Janette's eyes. Afraid to see her pity, something he knew he couldn't bear at that moment.

"No, I don't think you're crazy, Nikola," she stated simply. "Troubled, but not crazy...*NEVER* crazy. You've been trying to become

human for far too long, *mon amour*. Too many disappointments. Maybe it's about time to admit that you are a vampire and there's no going back. Wake up to what you truly are and there will be no more need for these dreams."

"I can't, Janette! There must be a way to become human again, to be free of this *curse*!!!"

"But look at what you're doing to yourself. Is mortality worth the price of your sanity?!"

"YES!...NO!...I don't know! I don't know anything right now! I just want to make sure I don't hurt anyone. Especially..." There was no need for him to say it. She knew he was thinking of his precious Natalie. "I just can't trust myself around humans right now. Can I stay here for a while? At least until I can decide what to do."

"Of course, Nikola. My home is at your disposal."

"Thank you, Janette," he said with a crooked smile, the first smile he'd shown since his arrival. His gratitude was heartfelt.

"I'll watch over you and make sure you don't go on any unscheduled outings." They walked arm-in-arm to the hidden elevator which led to her private quarters on the top floor.

He hadn't realized how tired he was. By the time the sun's first rays shone in the morning sky, he was fast asleep in Janette's guest bedroom. Janette silently entered the room with panther-like grace. He'd only managed to remove his shoes before falling asleep. Nicholas slept so soundly, he didn't stir, even when she removed the rest of his clothing.

"Dead to the world, eh, *mon amour*? You always were a sound sleeper." Janette stopped to admire the naked form of the man she had know so well, for so long. It was good to have him to herself again after all this time. She still had "feelings" for Nicholas. Yes, Nicholas. Never "Nick". "Nick" belonged to Natalie, but Nicholas...Nicholas would always belong to her. Her and LaCroix, she amended. Soon, soon, *mon amour*, if all goes well. Soon you'll give up this humanity nonsense and be back home where you belong, permanently.

You were right, Nicholas, she continued in her mind. LaCroix lacks the subtlety to have engineered this, the finesse to have stolen

into your dreams during your unguarded slumber. A suggestion here, a memory implanted there. It was all too easy, Nikola. You have become so much like them. You've forgotten so much about being a vampire. *Dormé, mon chér. Dormé.* Dream the dreams of the hunt. Soon, you will wake up to what you truly are, where you truly belong. Soon, so very soon. She slipped from the room as silently as she had come.

The Raven had proven to be the oasis he had needed. No bad dreams plagued him during his three day stay. This time spent with Janette had been strangely comforting. They drifted back into their old relationship, as if they had never been apart. With Janette, there was no need to fear intimacy. He couldn't hurt her. He didn't have to limit his response when sexually aroused. Literally feeding off one another's blood and emotions was an unparalleled experience. At least so far. It would be different with Natalie. Now where did that thought come from? He and Natalie were just friends, could only be friends, but if he ever achieved mortality again, maybe their relationship could... It was an interesting daydream.

"A penny for your thoughts," he heard Janette whisper in a soft, sultry voice. She bent down to kiss him lightly on the lips as he sat at their table in the Raven.

"I'm not sure they're worth the price. I was just daydreaming."

"You haven't been having more nightmares, have you?" She was suddenly alert, her beautiful face full of concern.

"You must be good for what ails me, Janette. I haven't had a nightmare since coming to the Raven, but I can't stay here forever. I have to return to my life." He sighed heavily, steeling himself against the response to his next words. "Now is as good a time as any. I'm going back home tonight, alone."

"I don't think that's wise, *mon chér*. You've had someone looking out for you here. What if you go 'sleep walking' again?"

"Nothing has happened in the three days I've been here. Maybe it was only a dream, in spite of the evidence. It may only have been cow's blood." That sounded lame, even to him.

"That's a lot of maybes, Nikola, but you're a big boy. If you need me, you certainly know where to find me. Excuse me, I have a business

to run. I've neglected it for far too long." She rose from the table, obviously annoyed, and melted into the crowd.

I'm sorry, Janette, he thought bitterly to himself. I have to know if it's over. I have to know.

There were a dozen messages on his answering machine, most of them from Natalie. Hers ranged from concern to annoyance to anger and finally to resignation. He rewound the tape to repeat the end of her last message.

"...just call me, Nick. Let me know what's going on. There's nothing we can't say to one another...well, you've got my number. *USE IT!*"

"Are we talking the lost weekend here?" Schanke's voice questioned. "Cohen's been asking about you. It would be nice to know which lie to feed her. Call me, buddy. The job you save may be your own. Hasta la bye-bye..."

It's nice to know you're missed, Knight said to himself. He was touched by the concern his fellow co-workers had for him. Natalie and Schanke hadn't been the only ones to inquire about the health of the invalid. Some even offered to bring over chicken soup. He was really going to miss this life if circumstances forced him to move on. No, he wouldn't accept a defeatist attitude. He *would* find out what was wrong. He *would* become human again. "Yeah, right," he said aloud. Then, shaking his head in wonder, "I've been working with Schanke too long."

A tingling sensation along his spine gave him a brief warning he had a human visitor, just as his front door was flung open. Judging from her initial expression, Natalie was obviously surprised to see him home. She quickly concealed it with one which was more businesslike. But during those unguarded seconds, he saw surprise, relief, anger and love. She was a very emotional person when she allowed herself to be.

"Well, you finally decided to return home. Oh, don't mind me. I just came to water the plants," she fumed, slamming the door shut.

"I don't keep plants any more, Nat."

"No small wonder. You probably left them for days without warning or explanation and they died of thirst. Did you notice how

cleverly I'm hiding my anger? I am *now* waiting for that explanation. And Nick, make it a *good one*." She stood there, fury incarnate, with foot tapping.

Sighing heavily, Nick launched into his story of dreams that seemed all too real. Natalie remained silent throughout the explanation, her face unreadable.

"Nick," she began hesitantly, "there was a homicide four nights ago. A woman was found with her throat slashed, but there was hardly any blood at the scene. On autopsy, it was discovered the slashes concealed two evenly spaced puncture wounds over the jugular. I was going to ask you about it but..."

"...I was indisposed," Nick finished. "What did she look like, Nat? No, let me tell you: she was a pretty brunette, no more than five-two, I'd say. Wore her hair cut short, framing her face, with a white streak at the left temple. She kept tucking it behind her ears when she spoke; a nervous habit, I suppose. She was probably in her late twenties, but with that much makeup on it was hard to tell. The perfume she wore was of the cheap variety you'd find in any number of department stores, a high alcohol content with a vaguely floral scent. If the skirt she was wearing had been any higher, it would have been a belt, but she definitely had the legs for it. She should have paid more attention to her surroundings. Too busy laughing with friends, I guess. It made her so easy to follow. As close as I was she never saw me, not until it was too late. At the end she could obviously feel someone in the shadows. She looked rather comical swiveling her head around like that. All I had to do was reach out..."

Natalie's expression said it all. The victim was the 'girl of his dreams' and he had just confessed to murder.

Natalie had been watching Nick's face. He had had a rapt expression reveling in the memory of the hunt, like a great white hunter in one of those dreadful old movies they watched together. What was happening to him?

"Well, say something, Nat." She gave a little start at his words. He stepped toward her. Instinctively she took a step back, fear in her eyes. My God, she's afraid of me, he thought. She's never been afraid of me before. "Get out, Nat! Get out of here while you still

can. I can't trust myself. Get out before the monster claims another victim!" he shouted angrily.

Natalie stood silently waiting for him to finish his tirade, watching the anguish on his face. She'd never seen him like this before. His body quivered with suppressed emotion. He seemed so unsure of himself, so vulnerable. "Are you finished?" she asked in a quiet voice.

He gave a slight shrug and nodded dejectedly.

"Well, I guess that makes it my turn." Her mind was racing. I must stay calm, he's near the breaking point. I must find a way to help him. Aloud she said, "How dare you take this long to tell me what's going on! We're *supposed* to be friends. More importantly, I'm your doctor. In case you forgot, I'm the one who's trying to help you become human again. You should have told me you were having...*problems*, at the very beginning."

"What could you have done?" he asked tiredly.

"I don't know, but at least I would have been aware something was wrong." That's to keep him talking, she thought to herself.

"I've just confessed to a murder, Nat. Weren't you listening? I've become a killer again. There's no magic potion in your bag to make that fact go away!"

"We don't know that you're the killer."

"Really? I described the victim, Nat! Admitted to following her — and we both know what happened!"

"The evidence 'suggests' a vampire as the killer, Nick. Not you, just a vampire. Hell, there's a 'community' of suspects!"

"Do you really believe that, Nat, or are you just trying to humor me?" He gave her a piercing stare. "That's what I thought!" Energy spent, he slumped down on the couch. "Please go, Nat." He cringed at the pleading tone in his voice. "Just go home and leave me alone," he said finally, cradling his heads in his hands.

"To do what, Nick?" She sat next to him on the couch, gently turning his face to hers. "I'm not going to lose you, Nick. You mean too much to me...and I don't mean as a friend. We both know that I love you, have loved you since the first moment we met. And Heaven, Hell and LaCroix notwithstanding, I'm going to find a way to help you."

He gathered her up in his arms, kissing her lightly on the forehead. "I thought I was the knight in this relationship."

"It's the nineties. Things change." They sat in companionable silence, simply holding on to one another, staring into the fire, for a very long time.

Cool. He could feel the cool air. The night was cool, crisp. The sky so clear, the starlight hurt the eye. Night air? How did he get outside? The last thing he remembered was Natalie leaving for work. That was...when was that? He looked at his wrist; no watch, but it was late, probably after midnight. He'd apparently been 'sleep-walking' again. As he stepped forward, he touched something at his feet. *Some one*, he quickly amended. A twenty-something blonde, with a slashed throat. Slashed throat? No! Not again, not again. There was blood on his clothes, hands. In the distance, he could hear a faint siren. Time to leave, figure out what happened later. He looked around for his car. No car. He must have flown to...wherever he was. He quickly took to the air and, gaining his bearings, flew straight home. The sirens had been getting uncomfortably close.

There was no denying it this time, he was the killer. That was no dream. He had been standing over the body, no one else around. I can't think! he exclaimed silently as he ran his hands through unruly, curly blond hair. Why can't I think?! What happened?

"What's happened, *mon chér*?" He looked up to see Janette as she emerged from the shadows near his bed on the second story of his loft. In an instant she was beside him. "You look flushed. Come, sit down, tell me all about it," she said, pulling him toward the couch. Her silky voice had a soothing effect on him. He found that he was able to think clearly, after a fashion.

"Fine. I've been doing just fine."

"You didn't look fine when you came in and you're still out sick according to your colleagues."

"Checking up on me, Janette? I thought you had a business to run."

"You're the one who came to me, remember? I've checked around. No one seems to have heard of one of our kind having your

particular 'condition'. You have always been unique. Why should this time prove any different?"

He wanted to tell her everything, but something held him back. Natalie. I'll wait and tell Natalie. "I'm sorry I was so short. Thank you for coming. I appreciate the concern but, as you can see, there's nothing wrong. I was just taking a little personal time from work."

"I see. Then you should have no objection to returning to the club with me for a little R&R. I have an especially good vintage of cow's blood waiting just for you. And the atmosphere will help you keep your mind occupied."

"I can't tonight, Janette. Nat's coming over. Maybe next time."

"Well, I guess that's my cue to leave. Say hello to sweet little Natalie for me, will you? We must get together one day for a little girl talk." She kissed a long, red-lacquered nailed finger and pressed it to his lips. "*Bon soir, mon amour*," and left as quickly as she had appeared.

Nick let out a long sigh. "Well, that went well. Now let's recap tonight's festivities. I've killed someone. Fled the scene of a murder and alienated a friend who was only trying to help. OH YEAH, it's been a *wonderful* evening!!"

Nicholas stood outside the recording booth studying LaCroix's handsome profile through the wide window between them.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddles masses yearning to breathe free!...Oh, sorry, wrong country. It's three in the morning and this is the Nightcrawler offering shelter to all my needy children tonight. Call me. Let me give you a shoulder to cry on. Confess to me your sins. I won't judge you because you are my children and...I...LOVE...YOU. The Nightcrawler's waiting for you." LaCroix turned on the music and found Nicholas staring into the radio control booth. He rose and joined the younger man in the hallway. Nick faced his "father," forming his thoughts carefully.

"What brings you here tonight, Nicholas? Or shall I try and guess?"

"Are you behind this, LaCroix?" he asked, his expression intense.

"Behind what? We talk so little these days. To what are you referring?"

"Come on! You know what's been happening."

"Only that Janette has been asking some very interesting questions. How are you feeling, Nicholas? Anything to confess?"

"Then you *do* know. Why, LaCroix? I thought we had a truce, of a sort. I thought you'd finally accepted my life here."

"It's not me, Nicholas." Nick continued to stare at him intensely. "Why would I lie? Yes, I want you back. But I want it to be your choice. I have the time. I can wait."

Nick leaned heavily against the wall looking down at his shoes. For a short time he studied their design, unable to ask his next question. As he had told Janette, he hadn't really believed LaCroix was the source of his troubles. Yet, there was no one else to blame. He had to know of LaCroix's innocence from his own lips. "I should have known it wouldn't be that easy," he mumbled. Then, in a louder voice, "I seem to have misjudged you, LaCroix...I...apologize."

"OUCH! That must have hurt! All joking aside, Nicholas, don't you think it's about time you told me everything? I'm your friend. Let me help you."

Nick hesitated only a few moments before laying it all out, including tonight's episode. The hope and expectancy on his face was gratifying to see. For the first time in ages, Nicholas was willing, more than willing, to accept his help.

"I'll find out what I can, Nicholas. With all due respect to Janette, I have more resources at my disposal. I promise you, Nicholas I will get to the bottom of this. In the meantime, get some rest and leave everything in my more than capable hands."

Nicholas' relief radiated from him in waves, washing over LaCroix. He only nodded and left, looking a lot more relaxed than he had upon arrival. LaCroix smiled to himself. Life could still hold surprises, even for him.

Dawn was beginning to break when Nick arrived home exhausted. Don Schanke was waiting for him.

"It lives!. I drop by to visit my sick partner and guess what, he's not home! It's been a week, Nick. You had better have a doctor's note saying you only have a month to live or Cohen's going to nail your heart to her office door. By the way, when do you shop? There's nothing in the fridge but that fancy red wine. No wonder you're still

'sick'." He used his hands to emphasize the last word by making imaginary quote marks in the air.

The night just keeps getting better and better, Nick thought bitterly to himself. "Thanks for the courtesy call, Schanke. Now, if you don't mind, I'm tired and I want to go to bed."

"Yeah, I do mind. Nick, I'm your partner. You gotta let me know what's going on here! I think you owe me that much for taking Cohen's heat for you."

"I've been sick. I'm getting better. End of story."

"Okay, have it your way, but you'd better get well real soon!" Schanke gave Nick one last piercing look and left, his anger and disappointment very apparent.

"I'd love to tell you everything, Schanke, but you'd never believe me." The sun was up. Time to sleep. To sleep, perchance to dream indeed, to quote Shakespeare. However, try as he might, he couldn't keep his eyes open. His last conscious thought was a fervent prayer that there would be no dreams.

He was outside again. Darkness surrounded everything. It was hard to see. At his feet lay another victim. He bent down to turn her over. Her curly, reddish-brown hair obscured her face. He gently brushed back her hair, revealing Natalie's face! Her throat had been torn out. Her blood on his hands. NOOO!!!

Nick awoke abruptly. He was still in bed. Still wearing his black silk pajamas. Natalie was standing over him, concern on her face. He rudely brushed past her, grabbing some clothes, using the need to dress as an excuse to avoid her. He needed the time to compose himself.

"It's all right, Nick," she said upon his return, still wearing black. Mourning colors? "You just had a bad dream. I came over to..." There was no need to explain. She was making sure he didn't sleepwalk again. If he did it during the day all his problems, along with his body, would disappear in a puff of smoke. "What did you dream about? You were crying out in your sleep."

"I can't remember. What time is it?"

"About five. The sun should be going down soon. You know, Nick, when we mere mortals start having problems we usually go to see..."

"A shrink?! You want me to see a psychiatrist? And tell him what, Nat? That I'm an eight-hundred-year-old vampire who's gone on a killing spree in his sleep? They'd lock me up! And in my case it could be for a *very* long time."

"It was only a suggestion. Nick, there was another murder last night. Did you leave the apartment?"

"No, I was here all night. Why do you ask?"

"Nick, I ran into Schanke. He told me you were out when he came by. Why did you lie?"

"Why did you ask if you already knew the truth?"

"You're evading the question, Nick. Do you know anything about this latest victim?!"

"No! Nothing! I went to see LaCroix. It took a while. We had a lot to talk about."

"I can imagine. You sure you don't know anything about this murder?"

"I said so, didn't I? Don't you believe me, Nat?" he shouted angrily, trying to vent the pressure he felt slowly building inside him.

"Whatever you say, Nick, whatever you say. Did LaCroix know anything about your condition?" she quickly changed the subject.

"No, but he said that he would look into it. Nat, I don't want you and Schanke coming here any more. At least, not until things are settled."

"We've been through this before, Nick."

"I mean it, Nat! I can't trust myself around you. You don't know what it's like! I'm a vampire; when I'm hungry, I feed. I don't want you to be my next meal."

"That will never happen, Nick."

"How do you know for sure, when I don't? You told me you loved me, Nat. If you were serious, walk away. *PLEASE!* I love you too, Nat, and I refuse to be the cause of your death." He stood there looking at her, pleading silently for her to grant him this one request.

"I can't do that, Nick," she finally said softly. He turned away in frustration, beating his fists against the wall. "Nick, I can't let you isolate yourself. You need to be around people. You need *help!*"

"I NEED TO BE LEFT ALONE!!! That's what I need!" He walked quickly to the refrigerator and grabbed a wine bottle. He used his teeth to pull out the cork and impatiently spat it out on the twelfth century Persian rug. After downing most of the liquid in a single gulp, he turned again to face her. A small trickle of blood flowed from the corner of his mouth. "Take a good look, Nat. This is what I am, no more denial. No more phony cures. No more false hope. I AM A VAMPIRE and humans are nothing to me but prey! Get out! Or I just might see what vintage you are!"

She watched in horrified fascination as his eyes changed from their normal gray-blue to glowing yellow. His fangs slowly descended. He moved toward her with deliberate, menacing, cat-like grace. "See the truth, Natalie," he said, his voice a harsh whisper "This is what I am!"

He could hear the increase in her heartbeat. The beating of her pulse held him enthralled; it was hypnotic. He continued his advance. For each step he took forward, she took one back. Their eyes locked. She wouldn't have turned away now if she could.

What am I doing, his mind cried out, but he couldn't stop himself. He continued to advance until she was stopped against the wall. There was nowhere else to go. Her fear was intoxicating. Her blood called to him. He held her there, pinned against the wall with his body. Reaching out, he touched her face, gently stroking her cheek. She was mesmerized. An insect caught in amber. He tilted her head, exposing her neck. Leaning in closer, he sniffed the heady fragrance of her blood. Flicking out his tongue to taste the salty residue her fear sweat left behind. *DON'T DO IT! DON'T DO IT!* Those words screamed inside his head. But, he *couldn't stop*. He *couldn't stop*! He lowered his head, fangs inching toward her throat —

The front door burst open. "Yo, Nick!" Schanke called out. Nick's head snapped around in annoyance. "What the...?!" Schanke quickly drew his weapon. "Get away from her, Nick!" he shouted. The police academy and experience prepared you for a lot of things, but not this! He could scarcely believe his eyes. His partner of three years was standing before him with yellow eyes glowing in the dimness of the apartment. And fangs...Oh my God, fangs! But, what was worse, it

looked like he was about to kill his Natalie, his girlfriend. JESUS! What the hell was going on?!

"I said get away from her, Nick! Don't make me fire, pard. Just let Natalie go!" His concentration broken by Schanke's unscheduled arrival, Nick was able to think again. He glanced at Schanke standing there with a determined expression, gun trained on him. Then at Natalie, eyes wide with fear and betrayal.

"What have I done?! What have I done?!" He released his hold on Natalie and she darted away from him to stand behind Schanke. Schanke never lowered his weapon. His eyes never wavered from his partner. Nick looked away, marshaling all his strength of will, to once again at least appear to be human.

"What are you, Nick? What in God's name are you?" Schanke asked in fear, confusion and disgust.

"*CURSED!*" Nick answered and fled into the night before Schanke could even react.

"Whoa!" Schanke, still wearing a look of astonishment, lowered his weapon. Natalie's complexion was ashen, but she looked okay. "Are you all right?" he inquired. His concern was naked in his voice.

It took Natalie a moment to compose herself. "I'm okay, Schanke." She could scarcely believe it. Nick had almost killed her!

"Then explain something to me: what the *Hell* is going on with Nick?! What *is* Nick, for that matter? He looked like...a vampire?" His eyes locked with Natalie's. There it was. What he couldn't bring himself to believe, even though his guts told him it was true. His partner, damn it, his best friend, was a creature of nightmares: a vampire.

"It's all right, Schanke. He didn't know what he was doing. He didn't mean it." Who was she trying to convince, Schanke or herself? The thought came unbidden in her head.

"All right?! Didn't mean it?! He almost killed you, Nat. We've got to find him. We can't let him roam around free. Geez. Oh, no, those recent murders. You don't think...Natalie, was that Nick?"

She didn't answer. She rubbed her throat.

"It was Nick, wasn't it, Nat?" He pressed her for an answer.

"We don't know that for sure. I hope not, but you're right about one thing: we've got to find Nick. Who knows what he'll do in the shape he's in. Schanke, are you Nick's friend?"

It was an honest question. It deserved an honest answer. He took a moment to search his feelings. "Yes, in spite of everything. Yes, I'm still his friend. What do we do?"

"Let's go to the Raven. He may go to Janette. If he's not there, there is one other person we can try. It's about time we met anyway." They journeyed into the night to search for Nick, to find him before it was too late.

Janette was concentrating on the club's accounts when she suddenly felt his presence. "Good evening, LaCroix. What brings you here?" She turned to face the man in black standing by the window in the far corner of the office.

"Forgive the intrusion, but I think it's time we had a little chat."

"About our favorite subject, Nicholas. Why are you doing this to him? Especially without asking my permission first." His voice conveyed unconcern, but his eyes held cold, blue fury.

"I was only trying to get him to forget this humanity foolishness and come home. I thought you wanted him back. I did it for you."

"You did it for yourself! Your jealousy is very unbecoming, Janette."

"Jealous! Of his precious Natalie? Don't be ridiculous!"

"And don't lie to me, Janette," he grabbed her by the arm, "ever again, or I shall have to reprimand you." The fear in Janette's eyes showed him he had gotten his point across. He gave a self-satisfied grin. "I promised Nick I would get to the bottom of his problems. Imagine my surprise to discover it was you. You are going with me to Nicholas' apartment, and you are going to tell him the truth."

She nodded her head sullenly, but she was not going to disagree. An idiot she was not. There was a knock at her office door. Miklos, her bartender, was there. "There are some people who insist on seeing you. They say they're friends of Nick's, you know, the cop. They wouldn't take no for an answer."

"It's all right, Miklos, show them in. You'd better leave, LaCroix."

"No, I've been looking forward to meeting Nicholas' *human* friends." Janette's mouth twitched in annoyance, but she said nothing.

Natalie led the way as she and Schanke entered Janette's office. They wore expressions of grim determination. Natalie started toward Janette, but stopped short when she noticed the room's other occupant. That's got to be the infamous LaCroix, she thought, looking at the tall, imposing man in black. Good, now I'll get some answers. "So you're LaCroix. I've heard so much about you."

"And you must be Dr. Natalie Lambert," he responded with Old World charm. An amused smile played on his lips. Stepping forward, he reached out and took her hand. "So happy to meet you at last, my dear." He gallantly kissed her hand. He then moved past her. "You, of course, must be Don Schanke, Nicholas' partner. Nice to meet you as well."

"Yeah, how do you do. Who are you again?"

"I am LaCroix, an old friend of Nick's."

Schanke looked at Nat. Lowering his voice to an anxious whisper, he urgently asked, "Is he one too? And Janette?" Natalie nodded absently. "Geez!" was all Schanke could manage to gasp. He was more than willing to let Natalie do all the talking.

"We came here looking for Nick. Have you seen him? He was very upset when he left home." She had addressed all her comments to LaCroix. It was he she would have to battle if Nick was going to achieve his freedom. At that moment she was ready to take on all comers.

LaCroix could hear the challenge in her voice, an eyebrow raised of its own volition. Yes...I can see why Nicholas is attracted to this one. It was as if only the two of them were in the room. Janette and Schanke stood silent witness to this test of wills. He answered her question. "Nicholas hasn't been here all night. I assume you already searched the bar, and none of the back rooms is occupied at present."

"I was afraid of that. Something happened tonight. Something that might push Nick over the edge. We must find him as soon as possible."

"We must find him? Are you asking my help? I'm sure Nicholas has told you of our past association."

"Yes, I know all about you, LaCroix, but Nick needs both of us. I'd be willing to make a pact with the Devil himself, if that's what it would take to help him." There, all her cards were on the table.

LaCroix came closer and looked her directly in the eyes. What he found there seemed satisfactory. "You already have, my dear. You already have. Our Nicholas is a lucky man, wouldn't you say, Janette?" Janette only snorted an unintelligible comment.

"I will use my connection with Nicholas to find him. You both wait here with Janette. I will send for you when I find him."

"No! I'll go with you," Natalie insisted.

"Do you trust me, Natalie?" LaCroix's question sent a chill down her spine. He sounded just like Nick. How much did he know about their relationship? Giving herself a little shake, she returned his stare.

"About as much as I have to, to find Nick."

LaCroix laughed. It was not a pleasant sound. "You'll do, Natalie. You'll do. Come, I have an idea of where he might be."

"Excuse me." Schanke had found his voice. "What am I supposed to be doing while you two are out looking for Nick?"

"Wait here with Janette. We'll call you. And, Schanke," Natalie added, "stay out of trouble."

"R-I-G-H-T! Just make sure you do the same," he said, tipping an imaginary hat in her direction.

LaCroix opened the door, allowing Natalie to go first. She looked back at him, puzzled. He wasn't at all what she expected.

He stood on a hill overlooking the city. The same place the body of his 'dream girl' had been found. How long ago was that...a week? It seemed like a lifetime ago. He was so tired. There was nothing left. Here was as good a place as any to...rest. The scene kept playing in his head: Schanke pointing a gun at him; Natalie in his arms with him, about to...I can't believe I almost killed her. *I ALMOST KILLED NAT.* There were splotches of dried red tears on his face. It had amazed him that he could still cry. But he had, wept at the memory of what he had almost done to Natalie, his beloved. Erica was right. When you have nothing more to contribute, it's time to die. After what happened, Nick felt his time had come. He had chosen this place as the appropriate spot for his...execution. Does anyone care

when a killer dies? Would Natalie? Would Schanke? It was three hours till sunrise. It was going to be a beautiful day. The day that doubt, guilt, frustration and confusion ended. He had always loved the night, but the dawn would be his salvation. He wasn't afraid now. He was ready to die.

"Nick!" He'd been thinking so much about Natalie he thought he heard her calling his name. It couldn't be her. No one knew he was here.

"Nicholas!" Now, that voice was unmistakable. It was LaCroix. He turned to see Natalie and LaCroix coming toward him. Together.

Natalie and LaCroix? I must be hallucinating. Dismissing them as phantoms, he turned back and looked up at the night sky, saying a silent farewell. Soon it would be all over.

"Nick, what are you doing here?" Nat called breathlessly as she ran toward him. "We've been looking for you everywhere." She reached out to touch him and he drew back in genuine surprise.

"Natalie? Natalie! It's really you! With LaCroix?" His astonishment was visible.

"Necessity makes strange bedfellows," LaCroix said with his characteristic grin as he approached the pair. "Come, Nicholas. Dawn is nearing. Let us leave this place."

"NO! I think it's about time I enjoyed a sunrise. Felt the warmth of the sun on my skin. It's going to be a beautiful day."

"You don't mean that, Nick. You're just upset," Natalie interjected, trying to keep her voice calm and clinical. "You're tired. Let's get you home to bed."

"I *said* no. I don't want to go home. I don't want to go to sleep. I just want to die. Let me die. *PLEASE!*"

"I told you before, I can't do that, Nick. I need you. Don't — please don't leave me...leave us. LaCroix, Janette, Schanke. We all love you. Don't do this, Nick. Don't do this to us!" She was crying. He could hear the sobs in her voice. He couldn't stand causing her pain.

"I almost killed you, Nat. I might succeed next time."

"How touching. The knight and his lady fair. He, bent on willful self-destruction," LaCroix said melodramatically, an outstretched hand

indicating Nicholas. "And she," his other hand pointing to Natalie, "equally determined to save him. How entertaining. Sorry for interrupting this tender scene." Seeing that he had their attention, LaCroix continued, "I must confess, I've never thought of you as a coward, Nicholas. The brave knight." He snorted his ridicule. "It would seem Natalie has all the courage. Did you know she came willingly with me to save you? She allowed me, *trusted* me, to carry her in my arms. Can you match her bravery, Nicholas? Are you willing to postpone your destruction long enough to find out the truth?"

"What are you saying, LaCroix? Do you know something about my problem? What have you found out?"

"If you want to find out, come back with us to the Raven. Or wait for the sun to rise. The choice is yours." Without asking permission, he swept Natalie into his arms and flew off into the night.

"All right, LaCroix," Nick called after them, "you win this round," and soon followed.

"Well, go on, Janette," LaCroix urged. "We are all waiting with bated breath." Three pairs of eyes bored into Janette, expectant.

She looked from face to face, delaying the inevitable. "You know I would *never* deliberately hurt you, Nikola, *mon chér*...I was only trying to help you, help you accept your true nature. It was me," she finally admitted. "I was the one who made the kills, made you think you'd become a killer again."

Schanke let out a low whistle. Nick was stunned. Natalie looked as if *she* could kill. But LaCroix merely looked amused.

"You've always been so vulnerable in your sleep, so open and trusting. It was so easy to...suggest things. At the last the compulsion was so strong, I was able to take you with me and leave you behind, awaking with the belief that you had made the kills. I let you taste the blood on my lips, remember the excitement of the kill." Janette kept her eyes on the ceiling, floor, anywhere but on Nikola's face during her confession. She couldn't bear his look at her utter betrayal. Then she turned to Natalie, looking her square in the face. "I never meant for him to hurt *you*. I swear! I never thought he would try to hurt you. I just thought the idea that he *might* would bring him back to *us*," she glanced at LaCroix, "where he belonged."

"I've always counted on you, Janette. How could you do this to me? It's going to take a while before I can forgive you, if ever! But at least I'm not a killer. I guess I should thank you for that."

"Thank her! He was going to kill himself because of that little stunt you pulled, Janette!" Natalie had to visibly pull herself together. She was livid.

"Well, I must say this has been one of the more interesting evenings of my life," Schanke said, taking advantage of the awkwardly silent room. "But, if I don't get home pretty soon, Myra's going to file for divorce. It's almost sunup." The revelations of the last half hour had been amazing, Schanke finally finished to himself.

"Not quite yet, detective. You seem to present us with another problem." LaCroix eyed Schanke dangerously. "You know of our existence. How do we know we can trust you to keep our little secret?"

"What? Now, wait a minute. Haven't I been helping you guys look for Nick? He's my partner, my friend. Besides, who would believe me?"

"I have a simple solution," Nick quickly spoke up. The mood in the room was turning dangerous for Schanke. "Do you trust me, Schanke?"

"Sure, we're partners, buddies."

"Then listen to me carefully." Nick's gaze hardened. It was compelling. His voice was the only thing Schanke could now hear. "You will return home to Myra and remember nothing that occurred tonight. You will only remember coming to visit me after work. You were happy to see I was getting better. You will remember nothing else. Do you understand? Nothing else!"

"I understand," Schanke answered in a flat, mechanical voice. He left Janette's office under Nick's spell.

"That was very good. It's nice to know you haven't forgotten everything I taught you." LaCroix beamed, a proud father.

"Come on, Nat. I'll take you home." He took her by the hand, then impulsively leaned over and kissed her tenderly on the cheek. His hands gently stroked her face, an echo of their last encounter. There was no menace, only love. He continued to stroke her upturned face. His fingers longed to imbed the contours of her lovely face

indelibly in his memory. He kissed her on the lips, a long, deep, satisfying kiss, which promised more possibilities. For a time, no one else existed to them. "Thank you, Nat. Thank you for trusting me when I didn't even trust myself. Thank you for believing in me." Smiling, they turned as one.

"Before we leave, I want to thank you, LaCroix. I couldn't have found Nick without your help." Natalie's gratitude was sincere.

Janette watched silently. LaCroix was also silent for a moment as he studied the two. He finally said, "We both had the same goal, Nicholas' safety. I wouldn't expect the same co-operation when we next meet." Nat was sure she had just been given warning that should they ever be at cross purposes, she had better tread carefully. LaCroix's eyes told her, her feeling was correct. Hers told him not to underestimate a determined woman.

"I, too, must thank you...father. Thank you for my life. But know this: I won't give up again. Someday I will be human." He offered Natalie his arm and together they left the club.

you don't say

Pam Jensen

One bright day, in the middle of the night
Two vampires decided to fight.
Back to back, they attacked each other,
Hugged and kissed, and sobbed, "My Brother!"
A deaf jogger heard them laugh and cry,
Stopped to make polite inquiries, "Why?"
Dressed in tidy tuxedos they looked a sight,
While inviting the cordial human out for a bite.
The steadily burning lamplight went "blink"
Like a giant cyclopean eye giving a knowing wink.
And if my story you find hard to believe,
Ask the blind policeman who saw it all...
And served as referee.

sundowner

by L. L. Wright

"Help! Help! Anybody out there?! Help!" Don Schanke yelled for the umpteenth time, his voice hoarse. Like all the times before, there was no reply. Only the empty echoing of his own calls.

Mercilessly, the hot sun beat down from above. With no shelter or shade to escape to, the sweat poured down his body, plastering clothing and whatever else it came in contact with into an uncomfortable, stick mess.

"Good God, Don! What kind of shit have you gotten yourself into now?"

Following the curvature of the walls of gray-green masonry, Schanke again paced out the dimensions of his confinement. The best description he could think of for this place was a huge well or underground storage shaft and, from the smell of it, probably connected to the sewer system.

"There's got to be a rational, logical explanation to all of this! The last thing I remember is....is, I can't remember! What the hell happened?"

"Okay, okay, let's run through the list of known facts. I'm tired and obviously confused, since I'm holding a running conversation with myself. The stink of this place has given me a pounding headache. I don't have the slightest idea where or how I got here, or how long I've been here." Wearily rubbing his temples with the tips of his fingers, trying to ease the tension in his head, Schanke continued, "That's great, just great, going from blabbering idiot to raving lunatic, all on a sunny afternoon. That's really helping the situation."

Squinting his eyes against the glare bouncing off the moist walls, he scanned the surrounding surfaces, trying again to spot that one detail that would mean hope and the possibility of escape.

"There's got to be a door or some way in and out of this place. Why can't I find it! I got in here somehow. Someone put me here. I didn't do this myself." Shouting again, "Hey! Whoever you are, let me out of here!" Again, his cry echoed off the walls and died away, still unanswered.

"Get hold of yourself. You have to keep your wits about you, they're the only thing you have left."

The sun, which had been directly overhead filling the entire area with its intense light, slowly changed its position. Now its rays were angled away from the center and there, low at the meeting of ground and wall, a small patch of shade was beginning to grow.

Taking advantage of the humble oasis from the heat of the sun, Schanke curled up in the spreading shadow. Even though the ground is wet and slimy, it's better than nothing, he thought to himself as he settled down to rest.

Lying in the cool darkness, with only the drip, drip, drip of water falling from somewhere above to the stagnant pools below to break the silence, Schanke continued talking, trying to alleviate the building anxiety within him. "They'll find me, I know they will. I'll get out of here. Nobody, but nobody, kidnaps a cop and gets away with it. I know the Captain's got the whole city on alert. They're searching for me right now."

He chuckled softly at the amusing image that came into his head. "Even old Knight will be out here hunting. In the broad daylight, covered head to toe and smeared with the strongest sunblock he can find, but he'll be out here. Knight's like a bloodhound. He can sniff out a trail like you'd never believe. My partner. Come on, pard. I'm here, come and get me, take me home. I want to go home." Repeating the last few words over and over again like a chant, Schanke let himself slowly drift off into a mind-numbing sleep.

Then suddenly he was awake, alert, eyes open, ears listening. There, there it was again. A scraping, grating; a muted sound of something moving. Raising his head from the cradle of his arms, he tried to visually locate the source of the disturbance. Nothing, he saw nothing moving.

What the..., Schanke thought as he continued concentrating on the muffled noise.

"Rat! It has to be rats! God, how I hate rats!" he said aloud.

The disturbance stopped as suddenly as it began.

Schanke lay back down, his head once again pillowed on his arm. Thoughts of home and chocolate pudding cake played in his mind, a small relief from the boredom and the anxiety.

Again, as before, he was startled out of his reverie by the mysterious activity of the unseen. This time rising to a full seated position, Schanke tried to triangulate, to locate the direction of the disturbance by slowly turning his head from side to side. It came from somewhere on his left.

"Goddamn rats! Shut the hell up!" He hit the wall next to him with the flat of his hand. Once again, silence fell like a heavy curtain over everything, and only the drip, drip, drip of water broke through.

But this time Schanke remained seated upright, waiting, listening. He wasn't disappointed. In less time than before, it was back, teasing him like a cat at a mouse.

Determined to find the source, he cautiously, quietly followed the sound, crawling on hands and knees through the thick mud.

Reaching the point where the rustling was at its loudest, he stopped. Leaning his body against the wall, ear pressed tight against the brick, he could plainly hear the movement of something within the wall.

Whatever it is, he thought, it has to be large. It couldn't be rats.

"Okay, let's think this through before acting. There's space behind this wall; that's obvious. Now, it could be a way out of here, or just another extension of this hole. A dead end. And what is on the other side that is making that noise, and do I really want to meet it?" he whispered, keeping his voice low, hoping only could hear it.

Moving his hand over the ancient, concrete brickwork, his fingers as well as his eyes noted the irregularities in this part of the wall's structure.

"Well, well! Look what we have here. Looks like someone's been at work. Trying to cover something up, are we? Everywhere else the construction is solid with well-mortared blocks, in good alignment, but right here, these six blocks, have been placed back, then smeared with mud to camouflage.

"I would never have seen it if I hadn't been crawling at this level. I wonder why they went to all the trouble? What is it they're hiding? Let's see."

The shadow slowly expanded as the sun continued its journey across the sky.

Schanke succeeded in prying loose one of the heavy concrete blocks from its resting place. Its removal and subsequent falling to the muddy floor left a gaping black hole in the wall.

"I've gone this far; what else is there to do now?" he asked himself as he sat back on his haunches, watching the hole like a cat waiting for a mouse to emerge.

There in the darkness, barely illuminated by the incoming light, an object moved. As it moved closer to the edge, Schanke's apprehension was getting the better of him, filling his mind with disturbing images.

"Stop it! Stop it! You've got to control your nerves. Whatever is in there can't be half as bad as I'm imagining. Mutant killer rats from the sewer! Indeed!"

Having made it all the way to the edge, then out and over, the object hung limply from the opening in the wall; a pale and very human hand.

"Oh, my God!" he whispered in shocked disbelief.

Pulling the wall apart took longer than he thought. It wasn't easy. The masonry was indeed loose but the bricks were large and cumbersome. The effort to remove the few he did pushed him far beyond exhaustion.

His fellow prisoner was free but not moving, lying face down in a crevice formed by a depression in the construction of the wall. The body was that of a male: average height, build and weight. His dark clothing was torn, slashed until it barely provided decent covering. The white-on-white skin that showed through revealed heavy marks of violence. Deep cuts and strange twin punctures left angry red marks on every inch of exposed flesh. No blood oozed from the wounds. He was dead.

Realizing that there was nothing he could have done even if had reached him in time, Schanke reverently crossed himself and said a barely remembered prayer from childhood for the departed soul.

"You poor slob," he said sadly. "What could you have done to deserve this kind of treatment? For that matter, what did I do to end up here?"

With a long moan and a slight movement, the corpse proved him wrong. He was still alive.

Quickly hooking his hands under the shoulders, Schanke firmly but gently pulled him out of his place of entombment and into the open. With the man's body braced against his lap, Schanke carefully turned him over. Looking down at the upturned face all hope, all anticipation of rescue, poured out of him like water down a drain.

"Oh, Nick! They got to you, too!"

The shadow spread its wings of darkness, enveloping more of the surrounding walls and ground, driving back the heat and the light.

Schanke sat back against the wall, cradling a semiconscious Nick in his arms.

"Dear God," he began praying, "have mercy on us. Help us, your faithful servants, in this our time of need. Help us get out of here, so that we can catch the perps behind this and bring them to justice, so that they will never be able to do this to another person again." He ended with a resounding Amen.

Nick groaned, his body tensed as if in pain.

"Yeah, I know, a little on the irreverent side. But God understands. It's a cop's prayer."

Nick relaxed and fell silent.

Watching the sun gleam off the pools of oily, gray water, Schanke released a long, sad sigh.

"Nick, we're never going to get out of here alive. We're going to die in this awful hole. We've either been left here to die of starvation and exposure or they're planning to return and finish us off at their leisure. Just like fish in a barrel, we haven't a chance.

"I'll never see Myra or Jennie again," his voice cracked with emotion, "no more fishing trips, no more whale-watching on the St. Lawrence, no chocolate pudding cakes, no more..." Changing the subject but not the emotion, "Natalie is really going to miss you, Nick. Friends, hell! Everyone could see the electricity between the two of

you. You two made a great couple. You should've done something about that, pard. I hope when our bodies are found she's not the one who has to do the work. It wouldn't be right." Laughing out loud, "You know, I don't think my underwear will be too clean by then and you — you they'll arrest for indecent exposure!"

"Schanke!"

"Yeah, Nick?"

"Schanke! Hunger!"

"I'm hungry, too, but I don't think Pizza Man delivers this far down into the depths of Hades."

"I hunger!" Nick's voice had a cold, hollow quality to it that sent shivers running up and down Schanke's spine.

"I know, I know," Schanke softly whispered. Cradling Nick in his arms, not knowing what else to do, he rocked him back and forth like a child, trying to soothe him like he had done to his own daughter when she was young and fretful.

"I understand, they did things to you, Nick. The bastards hurt you, tortured you. I know you're not feeling yourself but..." Schanke looked down at his friend's face.

Nick's eyes were open, staring straight ahead. Schanke watched as those eyes changed from deep blue to green, then to yellow, and then to a glowing red. In Nick's partially open mouth the canines were elongating, descending into predatory sharpness. Lying in Schanke's arms, Nick growled like a huge, feral cat.

Panicked by what he saw, Schanke shoved Nick away from him and quickly backpedaled, putting distance between them. "Shit! What the hell is wrong with you, Nick?"

"Hunger!" was the only reply.

From the place where he had landed Schanke watched as Nick, with fluid grace and feline assurance, stalked towards him, crawling on hands and knees. The torn clothing hung like shreds of midnight against his white, translucent skin, giving the eerie illusion of being hunted by a white tiger. The burning red eyes held him mesmerized, locked to the spot, unable to move, waiting for the fatal contact.

Nick pounced. The power of the impact sent both men rolling through the water and mud and into the bright sunlight.

The bloodcurdling howls of pain from Nick jerked Schanke out of his trance. Dazed and now very frightened, he watched as Nick thrashed about in the mud, smoke rising from his body as if it burned with an internal fire. Nick finally propelled himself back into the shadows. There apparently at ease, no longer burning, he paced back and forth, a caged animal, hissing frustration at his failure. The smell of cooked meat hung heavy in the air.

Lying where he had fallen in the warm sunlight, Schanke couldn't stop himself from shaking with fear. He realized for the first time who his killer was to be. There was no possibility of escape.

"You...you...you tried to kill me, Nick! What in God's name are you?" Schanke asked, trying to keep the shaking out of his voice.

Nick's answer was a low growl.

"You really are a vampire, aren't you?! The allergy to sunlight, those bottles of cow's blood in your refrigerator, it's all real!" Schanke shook his head in bewilderment. "And those stupid jokes I made. How was I to know!"

Schanke, fighting down the building terror in his gut, edged closer to the line dividing the light from the dark. "Nick! Nick! It's me, Schanke, your partner. Remember. Please remember, Nick!" Schanke called to him.

Nick stopped his pacing. He stood watching Schanke, his red glowing eyes cutting through the darkness like twin burning coals.

How can I get through to this? This thing wants to kill me. It isn't human. I have no weapons to defend myself. Oh God, I'm dead.

Then a thought came to him, a light cutting through the thickening gloom. It would have been so easy for Nick to pull him into the darkness. Like any other predator, conservation of effort was the key — no unnecessary wasted energy. So why had he leaped? Unless he consciously wanted to push me into the safety of the light. Oh God, Nick, you are trying to save me!

There was hope! Nick wasn't as far gone as he seemed. There had to be a way to get through to him. This is Hostage Negotiation 101, taken to the extreme, Schanke thought to himself. If I fail, I'll lose everything: my partner, my life, and maybe even my eternal soul.

Swallowing, trying to ease the dryness in his throat, Schanke called out to Nick again. "Come on, Nick! It's me, Schanke, your partner. Remember! I'll take you any way you come. Through thick and thin, in sickness and in health. Remember!" Schanke paused to see if he was having any effect.

Nick was standing still, listening in the shadows, watching.

"We're a team, you and I, the best around. We have the best arrest record in the entire province. Hey, maybe even in all of Canada!" Schanke knew he was stretching that last part, but he was fighting for his life. And his friend.

The area of shade had grown with the passage of time until it covered more than half of their prison. Schanke was forced to sit in a puddle of rank-smelling, tepid water to maintain his position as close to Nick and the line of demarcation as he dared to get. He felt the sun's heat roasting him as surely as it had burned Nick. Using his no longer white shirt to cover his head gave little relief from the heat.

He had talked on every aspect of their working relationship, their friendship and the job he could think of. The effect was obvious, if not necessarily reassuring. Nick was sitting. His eyes no longer glowed red but golden yellow, like those of a cat's.

"You know, Nick, Myra and Jennie are really very fond of you. In fact, I'm not supposed to tell you this and if Jennie found out I'm one de...ah, bad daddy, but Jennie has a big crush on you. She thinks you are whatever teenage girls are calling good-looking guys nowadays. She even told me you are better looking than that blond actor who's popular now — What's-His-Name!" Schanke paused in his monologue. His blabbering was having an effect on Nick. He sat with his knees against his chest, arms crossed on knees and his head cradled between them. Nick looked asleep. Knowing he couldn't trust that, Schanke still started crawling to the edge of the light. He had to see just what would happen.

Nick's head snapped up, his eyes flaming golden menace. A long slow hiss of warning issued from his fanged mouth. Schanke scrambled back into the safety of the light.

"Damn it, Nick, talk to me, please! The only way we can get out of this place is to work together. Please, Nick, I need you!"

Nick's eyes turned from yellow to green, then to their usual, normal deep blue. He looked tired and wasted.

"Look, Nick," Schanke began, already knowing what the answer was going to be. "If you need...well, I know I can spare a pint or two. You know I always give to the blood bank. What's a little blood between partners? Hey! Remember..." He was cut short by Nick's outburst of laughter.

"It doesn't work...that way!" The words came out slow and thick, as though coherent thought and speech were difficult, almost impossible, for Nick to do. "When sun goes down...I will kill you. The hunger will force me. No escape. For either of us." Nick leaned back against the wall, his face and body the perfect picture of hopeless resignation.

"Nick, there's got to be a way. We can't let it end this way. For Myra, Jennie and Natalie's sake, we've got to do something to save ourselves!" Schanke again started to cross over the barrier between the two worlds, the light and the dark. "I trust you, Nick. You wouldn't hurt or kill me."

In a blink Nick was there, Barring the way, his eyes golden, his fangs in evidence. "I will kill you!" he snarled.

Schanke backed into the sunlight.

Nick remained at the edge. His features had again softened, returning to his human appearance. His eyes had a sad, haunted look in them. "There's a way out. For both of us. A solution. The only one. I'm sorry, Schanke." With that, Nick slowly walked into the sunlight.

The effect was immediate. A veil of smoke whirled around him as the sun's full power concentrated on his body. A look of intense agony twisted his otherwise handsome features. The sizzling sound and the smell of burning flesh quickly filled the air.

Schanke couldn't do it, couldn't stand there and watch as his friend immolated himself, a martyr for the cause. Moving fast, he launched himself at Nick, delivering a hard kick into his abdomen. The impact sent Nick flying, landing him in the mud and back into the shadows.

"You're a fool!" he snarled as the two burning coals glared at Schanke from the dimness.

"I've been called worse. You should know that. I'm not going to let you kill yourself or me. We are going to work this out. You and me. Do I make myself clear? And, Nick, for God's sake, don't do that again. Geez, it looked nasty!"

The sun's continuous march across the sky had shrunk Schanke's haven of safety and light down to a few precious feet.

For hours he had kept up a continuous, one-way conversation about any subject that came into his mind. Work, home, fishing, sports, anything as long as it was something Nick was familiar with and could relate to. He didn't know if any of the words were getting through. Since having forcibly sent him back into the darkness, Nick had become a shadow among the shadows. Quiet, unseen and waiting.

"Nick! Nick! Damn it! Say something, growl, hiss, anything!" Only the drip, drip, drip of water falling into the pools answered him back.

"Nick! This isn't helping the situation. The sun is going down, and soon. I don't want to die, and I'm not going to let you kill me!" Schanke paused. Shading his eyes from the sun with his hand, he tried to peer into the gloom, looking for a sign of movement. There was nothing.

"The wall's surface is very rough. I just might be able to climb out of here. When I do, I'll bring back help for you. Natalie will know how to help you." Edging cautiously to the shadows, he directed his words into the heart of the darkness. "I understand that you won't be able to control yourself when the sun goes down. I'm doing this for the both of us. Nick, ah...Oh, hell!"

Removing his shoes and socks, it dawned on him just how uncomfortable he had really been. He started up the wall.

The climb was easier than he had anticipated. The toe and finger holds were firm and holding. He didn't look down at the waiting dark or up to the beckoning patch of blue above. Schanke only focused his attention on the next handhold, the next foot placement. With fear as a motivator, it's amazing the things one is capable of doing, he thought to himself.

As he climbed, surrounded by his guardian beacon of light, the air had a fresher smell to it, a dry feel unlike the dank humidity of below. How much further he didn't know, couldn't guess.

"I'm going to make it!" he said to the walls.

And then the sun winked once, then twice, then was gone.

Heart-pounding terror gripped him. Frozen to the spot, he couldn't move any further, enveloped in the cold blackness.

Feeling the touch of a hand on his shoulder, Schanke turned slowly in its direction and looked straight into a pair of glowing red eyes.

Screaming, he let go of his hold on the wall and fell down into the night.

As Schanke woke up, his surroundings slowly came into focus. Gray-green walls, a bright overhead light shining into his face, the sound of dripping water, and a pounding headache. And Nick Knight leaning over him, looking very concerned and worried.

"How do you feel, Schanke?"

"Like shit! Where the hell am I?"

"Downtown General, room 5909."

"What happened?"

"Don't you remember? Does the phrase 'pistol-whipped' bring anything to mind?"

Schanke touched the large bandage on the back of his head, and the pain and the memory of what happened came flooding back. The dark warehouse, the crack on the head from behind, the sharp pain, the flaring brilliant light and then darkness.

"The doctor wants to keep you under observation for at least 48 hours. That was a pretty severe whack on the head you received. You've been in and out of consciousness and blabbering incoherently ever since."

"The perp, he was caught?" Schanke asked.

"Don't we always?" the look on Nick's face changed into amused relief. "As a team, we have the most outstanding arrest record in the entire province of Ontario."

The last words triggered the image of the dream — Nick, the burning red eyes and the vampire fangs — and for a brief moment both images were superimposed one over the other.

Are you really a vampire, Nick? Schanke let the thought flow in his head. It would explain a great deal. Maybe it's just the effect of the whack on the old noggin, but it seems so logical. To exist, to survive, one would have to blend into society as closely as possible. Hiding under allergies to sunlight, the need for special diets and cow's blood for paint thickener as excuses, a vampire could pass as any other tax-paying, go-to-work member of the community. It makes sense, very good sense.

Well, well, my partner the vampire. As I've said many times before, you have to take the good with the bad. Schanke started laughing at the idea.

"Hey, Schanke, are you okay? You're acting strange."

"Ah, I'm all right." Calming down, he asked, "Myra, has she..."

"She's been here all of the morning. She just left to go home and see about Jennie. She'll be back this evening. I'll call her when I get home to let her know that her Darling Donny still has all of his marbles."

"Very funny, Knight. What time is it anyway?"

"A little after two in the afternoon. Well, I'll call and find out how you are doing later, so I'll be seeing..."

"Where do you think you're going?" Schanke demanded.

"I thought I would go home. It's been a long night."

"Ah, ha. From here I can see the curtains tightly drawn across the window and you standing as far away, as usual, as you can possibly get. Let me guess, it's a bright and sunny day in the neighborhood. You out driving in the full afternoon sun. I don't thing so."

"You know me, Schanke. Underground parking. I'll just crawl into the trunk of the car and wait till the sun goes down." Nick flashed him one of his innocent smiles.

Oh, you son of a gun, I can play that game too. "No, you're not! I need company. I need to be watched over by people who care about me, and you do care about me, don't you, Nick?" He sounded pouty and childish.

"I think you need a teddy bear. I'll go down to the gift shop and get you one," Nick countered, a smile on his lips.

"Well, at least stay until Myra returns. Seriously, I really would appreciate it. Hospitals always frighten me. You can sleep in the chair over here, next to my bed."

"Okay, I'll stay until Myra comes. But I want to make one thing very clear." Nick paused, looking him straight in the eye. "I don't do bedpans!"

in the matter of choice

by Robert McAllister

As I ran towards the beckoning door, I glanced back one last time to see if they were still tracking me. I knew they would.

I pushed the heavy door open and entered The Raven. Soft blue light and pleasantly loud music surrounded me. I made my way to the very corner of the establishment, took a seat in an empty booth, and waited for them to claim me. As I sat there in semi-darkness, I could see them push and shove people out of their path. A petite, darkly beautiful woman shouted her protest when pushed aside and I instinctively identified her as the one I had been told would grant me sanctuary.

I'm the one who killed their master, you see.

Suddenly, I was snared by Rolono, a hulking mean menace who walked the night. "You will come with us now," he demanded as he yanked me to my feet. "No more running for you. We've got you and you're not going anywhere but with us." I could see the tips of fangs between his thick lips. Bolono, his twin, appeared from the crowd and grabbed my free arm. He giggled insanely.

I was helpless.

I am only mortal. How was I supposed to know that the man I killed was a vampire?

I'd been working the streets to earn what little money I needed to keep myself fed and warm. I don't do drugs. I have no family. I should have stayed at that lousy shelter and continued to take the abuse they administered regularly.

"You will come with us. We have unfinished business, little girl," Rolono said as he and his brother pulled me out of the booth and towards the front door.

"We mat even let you live a little while longer," Bolono giggled into my ear, "after we're tired of amusing ourselves with you."

I'm going to die. I didn't ask for this, it just happened; I didn't mean to kill him. He was going to be my first — I admit I'm not experienced — but he weirded out, turned into one of them and started after me. Not for sex, either. I fought back but he was so much stronger, a full grown man, and one of 'them'. He thrust me back against an old table and it broke. I slid to the rug. My fingers gripped my weapon. My intention was to hit him until he was unconscious, then run like hell and keep running, but it didn't happen that way. He leaped towards me before I could get onto my feet, and he propelled himself onto the broken table leg I'd grabbed for a club. Everything went black.

I remember coming to, rolling a dead man off myself and being chased by this demon pair who claimed I had destroyed their master. That's how I came to be here.

As we approached the door I heard a voice — soft, clear, yet stern. "Where do you think you are going?" the woman asked.

Bolono answered coldly, "It's none of your affair!"

As they dragged me up the stairs she again called out. "Stop right where you are!" She came closer. "Let her go or there will be forfeit for this disruption."

I felt their grips loosen, then drop. I scurried down the stairs, away from them.

"Child, come to me. You are under my protection here," the dark-haired beauty said gently. "If anyone attempts to harm you here, they will answer to me. Is that clear?" She shot the twins an icy glare.

"You will pay for your interference, Janette," Rolono spat. They disappeared out the door. The music started up again and people milled about, drinking, mingling, speaking in hushed tones.

"Oh, I don't think so," I heard her say under her breath as I walked up to her. "What is your name, child?" Her voice carried a French accent.

"My name is Midnight, ma'am," I replied politely.

"Janette is my name and that is what I wish you to call me." She smiled sweetly and took my hand. Her fingers felt very cold. She guided me back to the booth in the corner and we sat. "Shall we begin at the beginning, Midnight?"

I related my story as well as I could. I felt nervous and unsettled, yet safe. Janette did not interrupt once. When I was finished she said, "Your name. Midnight — it's an unusual name. How did you come to receive such an unique name?"

"From one of the staffers at the shelter," I informed her with a shrug. "She'd found me at midnight — I was trying to stay warm and found a sort of shelter under the front porch of the building. Anyway, the name fit me, she said."

"And how is it you came to know about this place?" she asked.

I felt unsure of what had happened to lead me to the Raven. I explained, "It almost seems like a dream," I said. "I'd been running from them after I escaped the Shipley Hotel, where their master had taken me. Someone grabbed me and pulled me into a doorway a few blocks from here. I was so scared, but not really...the man told me about the Raven and he said that you would help me. He said he'd let you know when the danger was over. He told me to tell you that you would be safe and that he would take care of the one I killed. I think that was all of his message. Then he sent me here."

"What was this person's name?" Janette asked.

"I don't know his name, but he had long black hair and the deepest blue eyes I've ever seen," I answered. "He insisted that I should keep the secret of your kind."

"Well, Midnight, do you know what we are?" she asked pointedly.

"Vampires." I felt a shiver just saying it aloud. "Blood feeds you. I know, too, that it's dangerous for you to keep me here because I'm mortal and, well, food for your kind."

Her delicate fingers covered my hand. "Poor child, you do not understand. It's far more complicated than that. Your knowledge of us will bring the Enforcers, who are sworn to protect the community's privacy. I tell you the truth, child, because I don't want you to discover these facts when it is too late to make a sensible choice of action. You may have to choose if you wish to remain mortal, or to join us and become one of our kind. Be warned that the choice may not be yours, and this saddens me. How old are you, Midnight?"

"Just seventeen, a few weeks ago," I said. My heart was racing. "Does it matter?"

"No, it does not," Janette said quietly. She addressed the slim, dark-haired barman. "Miklos, find food for her and then settle her in my apartment, in the guest suite."

"But, Janette," the man protested. "Is it wise?"

She stood up. "Do as I say," she commanded.

As she turned to step into the crowd on the dance floor, I thought I could see a strange red stain on her cheek.

I slept heavily, with no dreams, and I was grateful. The next day — it must have been after noon — when I came down the back stairs and into the lounge, I noticed that Miklos was working behind the bar. I straddled a barstool. "Don't you ever leave the Raven, Miklos?"

"Yes," he answered. "I go, and I return early to prepare for the evening."

"Do you live nearby?" I asked.

"At the moment, I don't think that's any of your business," he shot back.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "I didn't know you were so secretive."

His tone became gentler. "I'm not, but you will learn things in time. Many things."

"Miklos, when will Janette be down?" I inquired.

"Later this evening," he replied. "Please, make yourself at home. There's food in the kitchen if you are hungry. We keep an impressive pantry," he half-grinned, "and cellar."

I shrugged and slid from the stool. "Thanks, but I'll skip breakfast. I'm going to explore a little, all right?"

"Be mindful," the bartender admonished.

I made my way into the kitchen, checked the refrigerators and pantries, and slipped out the kitchen door. It was daylight. My hostess and her friends were safely tucked in, and everyone knows humans are safe during the day while vampires sleep. I wandered through the neighborhood, visiting several of the shops and stores. I spent a little *too* much time exploring — and getting too far from the safety of the Raven. I was enjoying the safety of daylight and the chic boutiques of this upscale part of Toronto, so much so that I failed to notice the two

men who had skillfully trailed my wanderings since I left the club. Too late!

"So, where are we off to now?" came a gruff question.

I spun about, only to feel the hardness of a gun against my side. I backpedaled into a brick wall. "Don't do anything stupid, kid," the larger man warned.

"Wh—what do you want with me?" I stammered. I wished someone would appear, but the street was quite empty and they had maneuvered me into an alley. "Who are you? What do you want?" I asked again, a little more intensely. My knees felt as though they'd buckle. I thought I'd wet myself, or worse.

"We were asked to watch you while our employers are, ah, occupied." The man grinned sadistically. "They knew you'd come outside and think it was safe."

I was ushered back onto the sidewalk. They bookended me as we passed people, but no one seemed to notice anything was wrong. No one noticed how frightened I was. From seemingly nowhere, a lone figure appeared at the end of the block. It seemed to focus on our parade. My guards paid it no attention. The figure wore black, the hood of an Inverness cape drawn up to cover his head. As we passed by he looked up, and then I knew it was him, the man from last night who'd sent me to Janette's care.

How could he, I wondered, if he was a vampire? How could he be in daylight, here on the mall? Maybe, maybe I'd been wrong and he wasn't a vampire after all. He disappeared as we started across the narrow street.

"In here, girl," the tall man ordered. The smaller one forced me into a doorway, down a hall.

I had been stupid and now I was going to be very dead. The story of my life seemed to always be one step short. Suddenly one of them slammed me, headfirst, into a wall, then blackness pulled me down, down, down...

My eyelids felt heavy as I struggled to open them, and then I couldn't focus properly. It felt like I was being lifted up. Maybe this was what going to Heaven was all about — only Heaven wouldn't smell so awful, I thought. I coughed myself awake and realized the

stranger was carrying me from what must have been a fire. He looked down at me as though I was an angel, and I thought for a minute that he was so very beautiful it *must* be Heaven, or someplace near to it. Then the darkness came and smothered me. His beauty seemed on fire.

A familiar feminine voice called me back. "Midnight, wake up, Wake up, my dear. Time to eat something and regain your strength."

At first I thought it was only a dream, but she continued to prod me into wakefulness. When I shook off sleep, I was back in my bed in the guest suite of Janette's apartment. I jolted up so quickly that a wave of dizziness came over me. I touched my aching head. "All a dream, just some terrible dream."

Janette sat on the bed and helped me to sit up slowly. My head was swimming. "We need to speak, Midnight," she said in a soothing voice. "This has been an eventful day for you, and no, cherie, it was not a dream."

She helped me into the comfortable living room and that's when I saw him, the man from my vision. My protector.

"Midnight," he addressed me, "how good to see you up and fully conscious. I trust there are no lasting injuries?"

"It's you," I stammered. "Last night, and again this afternoon." I'm certain they both heard the excitement in my voice.

"Yes, I am," nodded the man in the hooded cape.

"Let me see you, please?" I begged. I tried to walk towards him but it was difficult because my legs felt like lead. "I have to know if you really are the man from the doorway, the man I described to Janette last night."

"No, not now, child," he raised his hand to fend me off, "but know that we shall meet again, dear Midnight, when I am, shall we say, more myself. Know that you are safe. Now rest, eat, refresh yourself."

He held out his hand to Janette and together they disappeared down the stairs.

Hours and many boring TV programs later, I freshened up and decided to make my way to the club to let Janette know I was feeling much better.

I approached the bar. "Miklos, where is Janette? I'd like to tell her something."

"She is in her private office." He poured a sweet wine and set it before me. I ignored the glass. "She does not wish to be disturbed." A patron called to him, and I took my chance to seek Janette out.

I was about to knock on the closed door when I heard voices. I moved closer and eavesdropped. I knew better — but I sensed danger.

"You didn't have to —"

"She was in danger. What else was I supposed to do?"

"You have had no rest in two days! You have not taken sustenance and look at you! Look at what you have done to your face and hands! You quite literally look drained."

"I am...I truly am..."

I peeked through the little crack in the door and gasped. The stranger's face was uncovered, burnt and scarred. I fell back; I didn't know what to do. I was confused and frightened, and my head was pounding again. Something provoked me to throw open the door and rush into the office. I skidded to a stop and watched, fascinated.

They were in an embrace. The stranger's mouth was on Janette's throat; her eyes were closed, and she made a sound that seemed to me what sexual ecstasy sounded like. The man drank from her long white throat and, as he took her blood, his features healed. He was oblivious to everything by taking from her.

"Oh..." the word slipped from my lips. They broke their embrace. He was smiling ever so faintly, looking very much like he had the previous night.

"What do you want, Midnight?" Janette asked as she dabbed a tissue to her ruby red lips.

"I, uh, I just..." I stuttered.

"Yes?" her head tilted to the right. "You what?"

"I'm feeling better," the words rushed out breathlessly.

"Fine," Janette nodded. "Now, go back upstairs and —"

"No," the tall stranger moved nearer. "Let her stay, Janette. If she is to know what we truly are, she should remain and I shall explain the Life to her." He motioned for me to sit in a chair near to Janette's neatly arranged desk. She stood quietly beside him.

"You know we are vampires, Midnight," he began. "And what you so rudely interrupted —" I felt a blush in my cheeks, "— was a healing and a singularly high form of sex between vampires. I tell you these things, dear child, because soon you will be asked to choose the Light or the Darkness. Do you understand?" His voice was commanding yet very gentle. I nodded that I understood him completely.

There was a racket in the hallway. We heard Miklos' voice, "You can't go in there! This is a private office, do you hear me?"

But the two vampires from the night before burst in, uninvited and very determined. They were halted by the stranger's burning eyes. I imagined they cowered. "Leave at once," my protector seethed. "Never speak of the girl or what transpired last night. If you fail to obey me, you will pay with your miserable existence's. The child is under *my* protection, do you understand?"

Their mirror faces turned white as ash, and in unison they said, "We beg your forgiveness." Rolono added, "We were unaware she was under your care, and the lady's."

"Go," the dark man ordered. The pair fled and Miklos shut the door, looking quite relieved.

He must have seen the questions in my eyes. "Yes, they know me," he said. "I am ancient and they are but mere children in our community. Another lesson to be learned: respect for those who are ancient. I am their master no less than the one who was destroyed at the hotel." He heaved a sigh wearily. "Now go, Midnight. Please help Miklos. You are safe for this night and tomorrow, but once the sun sets tomorrow you will make a choice. Those who come with the night have far greater power than even I."

He took Janette's hand and escorted her out of the office. They returned to the apartment above. I obeyed him and went into the lounge to volunteer my services.

They were again locked in one another's arms. Joèn and Janette relished one another. Janette vaguely recalled how, when they'd first met, she had intended to have him as her meal, only to discover, in her excitement, that Joèn was of her race. Now she only remembered how much she enjoyed his lovemaking. She snuggled deeper into his stronger arms. His tongue, probing, searching, tasted sweet to her and excited her all the more. Janette felt flooded by a sense of control, and she forced Joèn back and down onto her wide inviting bed. She straddled him, caressed his chest deftly, felt his power in her fingertips. She bent forward and caught another taste of his lips on her mouth. She bit his lower lip, then savored the trickle of blood in her throat. Joèn appeared helpless beneath her; he seemed to welcome her control over him, even encouraged her.

With a toss of her long black hair, Janette pressed her lips to his hungrily and moved her hips masterfully until he had entered her fully. Together they rocked and glided, nipping and nuzzling, until their moment of ecstasy nearly peaked — they bit into one another's necks at the moment of pleasure, the sharing of their blood heightening the sexual act. Then, spent and satiated, they lay together and rested.

It was kind of pleasant having something to do. I washed glasses, wiped off cocktail tables and did little errands for the kitchen staff. Anything really except, as Miklos kept reminding me, "You may do nothing behind the bar or with the liquor. You're under age after all.," he winked. I was beginning to like him a lot. I think he liked me, too.

It must have been two hours or so later when Janette and her lover reappeared. The man looked vibrant, very healthy, and I still thought he was the most beautiful man I had ever seen in my life. Even his blue eyes seemed brighter. He left a short while later.

Night came again to the Raven and with the night came the stranger. He greeted Janette by kissing her hand, just like in the old movies. It was very romantic. "And how are you tonight, Midnight?" he asked me.

"Much, much better." I dared to ask, "What is your name please?"

"I am called Joèn," the attractive man answered. Then he took my hand, as he had Janette's, and he kissed it. His lips were barely lukewarm and it sent a chill up my spine. And, well, someplace a lot more sensitive and private.

I knew at that moment what path I would choose. I wanted to belong.

But what about these Enforcers, I wondered. What if they robbed me of a choice? As if on cue, a tall elegantly dressed blond man appeared in the club, followed by a pair of what I figured must be Enforcers. They were frightening.

The blond man seemed to be part of this group and yet apart from them. He was the most frightening of the three. He arrogantly said, "I have come to plead your case, Janette, but I rather doubt if they will listen to me. I tried."

"LaCroix!" Joèn interrupted in a fury. "How dare you lie! You come to take what you feel is yours, and you've brought your henchmen, your Enforcers, to force Janette to kill merely as a thrill. If she fails, they will take the child and destroy her to satisfy your whims."

"Your imagination is running wild, Joèn," LaCroix responded coolly.

"You have no dominion here, LaCroix," Joèn informed him. "I have claimed Midnight as mine."

"No, my dear brother," LaCroix corrected him. "Janette must choose, since she first granted the child sanctuary. So I advise you very strongly to step aside and permit the choice to be made: she is either brought over and our secrets are kept intact, or I will have them kill her. Janette is, may I remind you, made from my blood. She belongs to me."

"Past tense, brother dear," Joèn said sarcastically. "Janette is now and forever mine. You cannot divide our house!"

It happened so quickly. LaCroix roared fiercely in his anger and, in a heartbeat, he and Joèn were locked in combat. Things were shattered, glass fractured, blood spattered. They seemed doomed to destroy one another. LaCroix's men moved then. I screamed as they rushed forward towards me, but Janette stepped before me and halted

their advance. "You must choose, Midnight, choose now!" she demanded. "Choose or we are both destroyed."

I clung to her. "Then I choose life — *your* life, life with you!"

Her fangs slid into my throat and I felt...felt myself change...

When I roused myself, an unsteady calm filled the room. Joèn and LaCroix had been separated by the Enforcers; it was a draw, I imagined. Two titans, neither winning.

Joèn drew near. I saw the smear of blood on his cheek. "Have you killed her, Janette?"

"Nearly, my love," my mistress said. "You should bring her across so we might all be as one."

LaCroix weakly shouted his protest, but too late. Joèn gathered me into his arms and, after biting his wrist, brought the open wound to my mouth. I was eager to drink. As I drank, he took from Janette — our blood flowing one to the other, mingling, blending as one.

"You fool," spat LaCroix. "Know that they will come for you in time, for you and your own." Angrily, he fled the place, the other two vampires close behind.

Silence filled the place. I was overwhelmed by sleep.

He touched her face with great tenderness. "My brother is far stronger than I imagined, Janette. I must leave and regain my strength. You know he will revenge himself. It is his way."

"Yes, I know, Joèn," the lovely lady admitted.

"You must care for Midnight," he reminded her. She is our child in truth. Teach her, help her to see the Darkness."

He came to me, hugged me and touched my hair. "Learn from Janette, Midnight. She is the mother of runaways, of children in the night. She will protect you and, in time, you will protect her as well." He released me, kissed me lightly, then kissed Janette's full mouth.

At the door, Joèn said, "Remember that I will watch over both of you. I will be with you always and in all ways. Even when you cannot see me, I will be with you." And he was gone.

"Will we ever see him again, Janette?" I sniffled. I wanted to cry, but fought to hold it back.

Her arm came around my shoulders and I rested my head against her. "Your blood flows with his, Midnight, and with mine. He will be with you when you need him, when you least expect him. A father senses when his child needs him."

I looked at her, my mother in more ways than one. We wept tears for the man who had stolen more than our hearts.

cop talk

by Winifred McBeth

What do you want me to say? I mean, he's my partner, right? Saved my tail a few times, let me tell you. That's what partners do: look out for each other.

You think I don't notice? Healthy as a hockey player and never eats anything, and I mean *anything*, on his shift. That's not exactly coffee in his Thermos, either. (Don't tell Nat about that. She'd blow a fuse if she knew about that thermos. Contrary to popular belief, I *do* know when silence is golden.)

Okay, so he's night shift exclusively, and he's always on the scene a little too fast for the rest of us. He's a *good* partner. We've got this routine down pat where we double-time the perp: Bad Cop and Worse Cop. *That's* teamwork. Gotten us a few confessions. (That, and Nick's Evil Eye look. *I'd* confess if he turned it on me. But who am I to say anything?)

Does he really think I didn't notice when he shows up for day court smelling like Carmen Miranda? Allergy, schmallergy, nobody should need that much sunblock. He's even got Natalie running interference for him. Oh, sure, she dug that bullet out of his upholstery — just not out of his car, if you get me. A coroner who makes house calls; some guys have it all.

Then there's Janette. That's one *fine* lady, even if she always looks like she should have feathers hanging out of her mouth. Nick says that he and Janette have a "history". With that kind of history, I never would have fallen asleep in class. She's hot for me, I can tell. She's got a spot in that wine rack with my name on it. (Don't get me wrong; I'm a happily married man...)

Nick's a good partner and a good cop. When my neck's on the line, I want him backing me up. I've done the same for him. Just because I don't say anything doesn't mean I don't notice anything — you get me? Paint thickener. Sure, right. But I'm never drinking out of his Thermos again.

punishments

by Bettie J. Brown

"Hey, Nick! Wakee, wakee. Tide and murder wait for no man. We've got a case, and it's a 'doozy'." Schanke's cheerful voice belied the horror of the situation. 'Doozy' was an understatement. She may have been beautiful once; it was hard to tell now. She had been tortured and beaten to death. Her blood painted the walls a deep burgundy. The smell threatened to overwhelm Nick's heightened senses.

"Whoever did this is one major league wacko," said Schanke with a slight frown, the only outward sign of his disdain. "What could anyone do to deserve this? Oh, come on, Knight! Don't get sick on me now!" It was a familiar whine. Knight said nothing. He stared, white-faced, at the crime scene.

"What kind of sick wacko, indeed," he said softly to himself

PARIS 1924

The City of Lights was earning its name tonight. Every blessed soul in the city appeared to be on its streets, laughing and singing. All save one. The handsome blond man wandered the streets, oblivious to the merriment, cloaked in his own misery. Another supposed cure had proven to be a dismal failure. "I can't keep doing this to myself! LaCroix was right! There is no cure. I must stop this!!!"

He found himself walking along the Seine, watching a barge filled with party-goers sail its dark waters. It was alive with life and laughter he didn't feel. Although he longed to bask in the warm glow of friendship, all he had was the darkness that threatened to consume him forever, dark as the swirling black waters of the river, so cold and inviting.

"I wouldn't try that, *mon ami*. It won't work."

Nicholas turned quickly to look at the stranger who had suddenly materialized from the shadows. "What? I don't know what you are talking about!"

"Didn't your master teach you anything? By throwing yourself into the river, you only succeed in getting extremely cold and wet."

"What business is it of yours, *monsieur*?" Nick asked petulantly.

"None, *monsieur*, none at all. However, you must admit, a suicidal vampire is not one of Paris' usual attractions. By all means, pray continue. A *fool* must do what a *fool* must do."

Nicholas whirled to face the man, snarling. His eyes flashed a fierce yellow. His fangs extended.

"Ah, then it is still possible to anger you. I thought you were too full of self-pity to notice an insult when you heard one."

"Who are you? Why do you care?" Nick growled through clenched teeth.

"Forgive me, *mon ami*. I am Jacques."

"Stop calling me that!!! *We Are Not Friends!!!* Just leave me alone," Nick finally whispered tiredly.

"As you wish..."

"Nick! Nick! Will you snap out of La-La-Land? We're supposed to be working here!"

"I was just thinking," Nick said with a self-deprecating shrug.

"Yeah, right, what else is new?"

"Any witnesses? I can't believe no one heard what was happening here."

"Just the usual, we thought it was just another argument and we didn't want to get involved, et cetera."

"So, what you're saying is a young woman was beaten to death while her neighbors listened and did nothing, because they didn't want to get *involved*?"

"Yeah, the *usual*, like I said."

Nick shook his head. Sometimes the callous disregard humans had toward one another made vampires seem like priests. "She must have taken a while to die. How could they stand by and do nothing?"

"How long has she been dead, Nat?"

"I would say only four to six hours, but I won't know for sure until I've run further tests. It's cases like these that make me want to rethink my choice of career. Just make sure you get this bastard, Nick!" Her impotent fury made her words ring in the quiet house.

"They seemed like the perfect couple. I still can't believe it. Sure, they fought, all couples do, but this..." The next-door neighbor,

Charlotte Cummins by name, could only blink back unshed tears and shake her head. "She was such a sweet girl. Always asking me if I wanted something when she went to the store. Willing to spend time with an old lady even though she was so young and pretty. How could he? How could he? He loved her so much..." Once again Nick found himself lost in thought.

PARIS

"Come, my young friend. Dawn is breaking and I don't believe you are serious about ending it all."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because, if you were serious, you would have finished yourself off by now, instead of watching the lights of the city. Come, I don't live far as the bat flies, so to speak."

A small smile played in the corner of Nicholas' mouth. "All right, let's go." His companion gave a hearty laugh and they took to the air.

It was an artist's loft in the Montmartre, complete with unfinished oils, sculptures and dust. One would expect Monet or Picasso to greet them at any moment.

"An artist?"

"*Mais certainement, mon ami.* This is Paris; everybody is an artist in one form or another. We have writers, sculptors, poets. This is the home of the modern Renaissance, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"I suppose."

"I've answered all of your questions, now answer a few of mine. Who are *you* and why were you on the river?"

A long peal of hysterical laughter was, at first, the only answer Jacques had to his inquiry, followed by a sob which wracked Nicholas' entire body. "It's a long story."

"We have all day, my friend."

"Forgive me, you have shown me nothing but kindness and I have been sullen and uncooperative. My name is Nicholas."

"*Enchenté*, Nicholas, but you haven't answered my other question." Their eyes locked. Jacques' question was only met with stony silence. "As I said, we have all day. You must be hungry. Here, enjoy the specialty of the house." Jacques passed Nicholas a wine

bottle full of a burgundy liquid. Not wanting to further insult his host, Nick took it and drank deeply. When he tasted the liquid his expression changed to one of utter amazement.

"This is *cow's blood*!" he exclaimed in pure surprise.

"I should have warned you, my young friend. I am what our kind might consider an eccentric. I do not kill. I only drink animal's blood for sustenance," Jacques said with a sheepish grin.

Nicholas' long, loud laugh made him concerned that the young man was still seriously upset. Especially when it threatened to continue indefinitely.

"Please, calm yourself!"

The laughter began to slowly recede. "Pardon, *Monsieur*, it's just the irony of the situation. It's just..." The words trailed off.

Jacques smiled, a bit perplexed, but at least his guest was finally showing signs of life.

"You see, I too am a vampire who chooses not to kill."

"From the first moment I saw you, I knew we had something in common."

"Why were you following me?" Until he'd said it aloud, he hadn't realized that it was indeed true. Jacques had been following him. He had, in fact, been following him all night.

The neighbors all said the same thing. "They loved each other so much. How could this have happened? We just mind our own business."

Harriet and Charles Crawford were a typical yuppie couple. Two careers and no children. Doting on each other in public, behind closed doors a different picture emerged.

Charles was a tall, powerfully-built man with dark hair and eyes, who appeared to maintain his physique by a daily regimen of weightlifting and wife-beating.

Harriet, a slender brunette with doe-like brown eyes, was prone to slips, trips, and other sundry causes of black eyes and sprained wrists.

This was a story all policemen heard repeatedly throughout their careers. First love and devotion, then jealousy and suspicion. More

to the point, Charles was still out there, a man with intelligence, money and powerful friends. He wasn't going to be caught easily. "God, how I hate domestic violence cases," Nick stated with a long sigh.

"Too close for comfort, eh, Nicholas?" a familiar voice whispered inside his head.

PARIS

Jacques met honest stare with honest stare. Why *had* he followed this particular young man? Could it be that he had touched some chord of familiarity in his soul? Yes, that was it. So much of this young man reminded him of himself. "I followed you because you seemed to need a friend." He knew this to be the simple truth.

Nicholas turned away hastily. It was true. He desperately needed someone. Someone whose friendship didn't have strings that would bind him for centuries. Jacques appeared to be that person. In the short time he'd known him, he'd saved his life and given him the sanctuary of his home, even before Nicholas had told him his name. Jacques' *joie de vivre* warmed Nicholas like the sun he so desperately coveted. "I thank you for your kindness, but I must be leaving."

"Leaving? It's full daylight. You must stay at least until tonight. What kind of host would I be if I allowed you to leave now?"

"I have...family who will be worried about me. I must leave soon."

"Don't go by appearances. This loft has all the modern necessities. You can ring your family and assure them of your safety." Jacques quickly removed some discarded clothes splattered with oil paint to reveal a telephone. "Don't mind me. I have to check the progress of a new painting I have drying in the back. I will leave you to your privacy."

"Just where the *hell* are you?" he heard Janette urgently whisper into the receiver. "LaCroix has been searching for you everywhere. He was not *pleased* when you did not return home last night. You know how he gets! Why are you causing this trouble?"

"I wasn't trying to cause trouble. I went for a walk and lost track of the time. I can't return now, but as soon as the sun sets, I'll be home." Nicholas clicked off before Janette could offer further protests.

"Everything well at home, I trust?"

"Your work tends toward the abstract," Nicholas said, changing the subject. Jacques pretended not to notice and warmed to his favorite topic, mainly his paintings. The day passed pleasantly. Conversation remained on a surface level.

"Well, I see our prodigal son has returned," LaCroix said, his low voice hardened to a sharp and dangerous edge. His cold, blue, unblinking eyes pinned Nicholas with their stare. His body was taut and Nicholas knew he had better choose his next words very carefully.

"I was walking by the river, lost in thought. Before I knew it, dawn was breaking. I spent the day in one of those dreadful tourist traps near the Montmartre. I returned here as soon as the sun set." The last words came out in a rush. Did he believe me? Why doesn't he say something?

"Of course, Nicholas," LaCroix said with a smile that never quite reached his eyes. He took a step closer..."But should you, in future, feel the need to go walking, be so kind as to inform us of any delays in your return." With that LaCroix left the room. Nicholas released the breath he didn't know he was holding and heard its twin coming from Janette. She gave him a displeased look and followed LaCroix out the door.

"My client has voluntarily turned himself in and is here to assist you with your inquiries into the death of his beloved wife, Harriet."

Charles Crawford sat silently, looking coolly at the detectives, a smug look on his handsome face. "Catch me if you can" was written all over him.

"Let me get this straight: Your client is saying he innocent of killing his wife. We have a dozen witnesses that say he's the perp." Schanke could only stare incredulously at Crawford.

"I was out of town on a business trip at the time of my wife's death and I have a dozen witnesses that can confirm *that!*" Charles Crawford ended his statement with a slight triumphant smile.

"Your beloved wife was also battered, or do you deny that as well?" Knight questioned pointedly.

"She was prone to ear infections that caused her to frequently lose her balance and injure herself. She had always been accident-

prone. My God, man, I'm a vice president being groomed for CEO! Do I look like the type of man who would beat his wife?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, you do!" yelled Schanke. "If I had a nickel for every guy who said that, I'd have my *own* corporation!"

"You have no proof."

"Give us time," Nick smiled nastily at Crawford.

"There is no need for this. As I said, my client is here *voluntarily*."

"All right, make your statement. Come into my parlor." Schanke could smile as nastily as the next guy.

PARIS

"What do you think?"

"Not bad for a first effort. I do believe you have the touch."

"Thank you, Jacques."

"Thank you for what? I was stating the obvious. Your use of color, composition, proves you have the feel for the abstract. You have the true soul of an artist!"

"I've never thought of myself as an artist. I've tried painting before, but you must be wrong, Jacques. After all, we are vampires. We have no soul."

"That's where you are wrong, my young friend. We are the very essence of the soul. We are eternal."

"Must you always be so cheerful?!" Nicholas finished with a rueful grin.

"Why not? Life is good. Each day we live offers new adventures. You still think of yourself as a killer, a creature of darkness. So did I in the beginning."

"Just how old are you, Jacques?"

Jacques' eyes gained a misty quality. He was a handsome man, slimly built, with dark features. His wavy black hair fell to his shoulders. He looked to be a man in his middle years.

"Ah, young one. I marched with Hannibal over the Alps. I watched the Visigoths come over the seventh hill. I was a confidante of Charlemagne. Over the years I have been soldier, merchant and would-be ruler, but I only truly found myself when I became an artist.

You can express yourself with art, Nicholas. You can bare your soul on the canvas. Try it. Exorcise those demons once and for all."

"I never knew our kind could be like you. I thought old ones were like...like others I've known."

"That's me. A true original!" Jacques said with a laugh. He playfully ruffled Nicholas' curly blond hair as if he were an errant child. The touch turned into a caress. "Forgive me, I overstep myself."

"No!" then more softly, "no, you do not," Nicholas said as he gently took Jacques' hand in his. "I have been more at peace with myself in the months since I've met you than in eight hundred years of empty existence. My life began again the night we met. I want this as much as you."

Nicholas kissed the fingers of the man he had come to think of as his mentor, confidante and friend. Jacques smelled richly of oil paint and linseed. He felt Jacques' strong fingers trace a delicate pattern down his cheek, neck, chest leaving behind a trail of liquid fire on his cool, alabaster skin.

He has the softest lips I've ever felt, Jacques thought. Such perfect skin. His is a *rare* work of art. There was no holding back. There was only the perfect blending of the soul. At long last, this was joy. This was bliss. This was peace.

Charles Crawford sat slumped in his chair, elbows on the table in front of him, his head in his hands. After weeks of questioning, he no longer looked so confident or imposing. His arrogance, like his alibi, had disappeared like a conjurer's trick, all smoke and illusion.

"We agreed, *no children*. She shouldn't have disobeyed me." Knight and Schanke exchanged looks over his head. Harriet Crawford had lost her life because of Crawford's wounded pride and inability to share her with anyone, even his own child. "We agreed. She should have stuck to our agreement." He repeated it over and over again, like a mantra. When it became clear they weren't going to get any new information, Schanke signed off and stopped the tape.

"Somebody get this vermin out of here!" A uniformed policeman removed Crawford, taking him back to his cell. "Can you believe that guy?"

"It takes all kinds, Schanke. Nothing should surprise us anymore."

"Well, I'm going home as soon as we type up the report, and I'm going to hug and kiss Myra and Jenny. Children are a gift, Knight. A blessing. Geez!" Schanke left the room, shaking his head.

The amazing thing was, Crawford hadn't wanted to kill his wife as much as remove his rival. Her refusal of an abortion had fueled his sense of betrayal. How could she love someone other than him? In his mind, she had become unfaithful and he had felt justified in killing her.

PARIS

Nicholas awoke with a start, instinctively reaching out for Jacques. He found the bedcovers empty. An icy feeling came over him. In the darkness, he could make out a deep burgundy splatter on the far wall. Suddenly, he was dragged from the bed and found himself face to face with a *very* angry LaCroix.

"I'm afraid your friend won't be joining us this evening," he said in a harsh whisper. LaCroix's eyes were yellow; his fangs, very much in evidence, were inches from Nicholas' throat. The loft was unnaturally quiet. Death was in the room and the world was holding its breath, anxious to see what would happen next.

Nicholas' breath came in short, quick gasps. He was acutely aware of LaCroix's closeness, the touch of his hands on his throat, the tautness of his muscles ready to pounce if he dared try to move away. For a moment, there were no words.

"Where is Jacques?" Nick asked in a demanding tone, finally managing to bring himself to speak. "What have you done with him?"

"I'd be more concerned about my own safety, if I were you, Nicholas. You've been a very *naughty* boy. Oh, do struggle, Nicholas. Give me an excuse to hurt you. Did you forget to whom you belonged? Just how do I *deal* with this betrayal?"

"I didn't betray you, LaCroix!"

LaCroix's slow gaze took in Nicholas' pale nakedness. A menacing smile spread over his lips. "*Really?* What kind of fool do you take me for?"

"Why are you so upset? We've had other lovers before. Why should you care about Jacques? Where is he, LaCroix?"

"Have a care, Nicholas! Do not address me in that insolent tone of voice!" LaCroix grappled with his anger and then continued in a much calmer tone. "As to your question: you have never, truly, given your heart to anyone else before. Now, about your friend...well, just let us say his head will make a fetching display on my mantelpiece."

"*LIAR!!!*" Nicholas cried in anguish, his eyes drawn to the stain on the far wall. The look on LaCroix's face made him see the truth. Nicholas felt a crushing pain over his heart. How could this be? He could still feel the tenderness of Jacques' touch on his skin, remember the smell of him. How could he be gone, so soon, from his life? Sorrow, regret, there were no words to describe the deep, lingering feeling of utter loneliness that threatened to overwhelm him at that moment.

"I could kill you, LaCroix," he whispered in a voice strangled with emotion.

"You could try, but we both know that would be fruitless. You have only yourself to blame, Nicholas. Your friend would still be alive if it weren't for you."

Nicholas' lunge caught LaCroix completely by surprise, knocking him to the floor. The younger man's fangs sank into LaCroix's neck. A powerful backhanded blow forced Nick to break his connection. He lay stunned, barely conscious, against the opposite wall.

"If that's how you wan to play it, so be it." Before he could move, LaCroix's fangs were at his throat. He could feel his life's blood being drained away. A strange kind of peace flowed through him and he accepted death's embrace.

"We are the very essence of the soul. We are eternal," Nicholas heard Jacques' voice saying to him. He reached out for Jacques in his mind as blackness threatened to take him.

"*No!* No, you don't get off that easily, *mon amour*." LaCroix lifted Nicholas from the floor and placed him, none too gently, on the bed. "You would gladly follow your lover into death, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you?! But, as I told you, Nicholas, you belong to me forever!"

LaCroix had weakened him to the point where movement or speech was impossible. He was completely at LaCroix's mercy and acutely aware that LaCroix had none.

"You are *mine*, Nicholas! Your *heart*! Your *body*! Your *soul*! Everything that you are belongs to me, and I think it's about time I renewed my claim." He ran a slow, proprietary hand over Nicholas' body. "Jacques was right. You are a work of art."

A single blood-red tear formed in the corner of Nicholas' eye and flowed slowly down his cheek.

Nick awoke with a start, wildly searching the shadows of his bedroom. He was alone. Safe in his *own* bed. His *own* loft.

"I belong to *myself*, LaCroix!!!" he whispered defiantly to the darkness.

hunting song

by Winifred McBeth

Carrying a hunting bow,
Man is seeking food.
Death is near,
Flee in fear
Through the autumn wood.

Run, run, hunted, run
Fast as fear can go, you run
Tho' you run 'til you're done
Can you outrun the hunger?

Shadows by the fireside
Eyes that gleam with greed
Feast their fill
From the kill
Blood will answer need.

Goodwife searching for her man
Comes upon the scene.
Drink regret,
Taste it yet,
Hear the widow's keen.

Seeking once again to be
One of human kind
Seize the day
As you may
But shadows run behind.

Run, run, hunter, run
Fast as fear can go, you run
Tho' you run to the sun
Can you outrun the hunger?

unfinished business

by Lisa L. Wright

Janette, the owner of the Raven, sat in her usual position at the end of the bar, reveling in the atmosphere that pulsed through her club tonight. The music, the lights and the gyrating bodies all blended together; a beating heart, full of vitality and passion. She noticed that someone was moving in her direction, through the mass of swarming bodies. There is always one, she thought solemnly to herself, that tries to hit on the legendary proprietress of the Raven, at least once a night. Poor fools, if they only knew.

Not even looking up at the man standing silently next to her, Janette casually asked, "What can I do for you, *Monsieur*?"

"Have I changed so much that you don't recognize me, Janette?"

"Nikola!" She gasped, looking up into his face.

Sitting down on the stool directly in front of her, she saw a man past middle age, graying at the temples, heavy character lines around the eyes; the rest of the face carried the touch of the handsome young man she knew so long ago. His eyes still carried their youthful brilliance as they scanned her confused face.

"You've grown old!" she said in an amazed whisper as she leaned across the table, her hand reaching out, fingers gently touching the lines and wrinkles.

"We mortals do age," he said, smiling. "It's been a long time since we last met."

"Over thirty years, Nikola, since the last time I set eyes on you."

Nicholas took her hand from his cheek and firmly held it in both of his, lightly planting a kiss on her captured fingers. "It has been a very long time."

"Mortality...has it been good to you?" she questioned.

"Yes, in its own way. I have a wife and family. Would you like to see pictures?" he asked, a boyish grin on his face.

Still with a look of amazement on her face, Janette said, "Why don't we go to my office where it's quieter and," looking at his hands, "warmer."

Janette poked the fire into roaring brilliance, illuminating the richly decorated office/apartment. Nicholas sat in a large plush chair set close to the fireplace, a mug of hot tea held cupped in his hands, eyes closed, a look of peaceful relaxation on his face.

Janette moved to his side, her hand tenderly touching his shoulder. "Are you more comfortable now, Nikola?" she inquired.

"Yes, thank you. I was feeling a bit cold," was his reply.

"Tell me," Janette asked softly, "why have you come?"

The room was quiet, only the sound of the singing fire disrupting the silence. Nicholas watched the flames dancing in the grating for a minute before answering.

"I came, oh, for many reasons," he answered with a sigh. His hand fondly caressed Janette's as it lay on his shoulder. "You didn't leave. I thought you would have moved on by now."

Smiling and with a shrug of her shoulders, she replied, "There didn't seem to be any reason to move on. In this day and age, no one seems to notice anything, whether it's unusual or not. I guess they think because of the dark setting of the club and, maybe, a bit of surgery every so often, it's the reason why I never seem to age. In fact," she said laughing, "I doubt if knowing that I was a vampire would matter to these people. They are so preoccupied with themselves, nothing else matters. Besides, there seemed to be something that always kept me here. You didn't leave either, when you became...a mortal."

"There was no reason for me to move on either. I could now, set down roots. Make a home, have a career. Not have to move on before questions were asked. I started a life here; I just continued with it."

Janette knelt by the side of his chair, her hand still interlocked with his.

"Natalie and I are still married," he continued. "We have three children. My son, the eldest, is a school teacher. Third grade. My middle child, a daughter, is studying to be a doctor, like her mother. And our youngest, another daughter, just graduated from the Police Academy. She plans on becoming a homicide detective someday, just like her old dad."

"You said you have pictures? Photos? May I see them? Janette asked with an eager smile.

In response to her request, the half empty cup resting on the table beside him, Nicholas reached into the folds of his jacket and brought out the package of family photos and handed them to her.

Janette sat on the floor by his chair examining, in silence, each and every photograph by the light of the roaring fire. The colors of the shifting flames reflected against her porcelain skin and dark hair. Nicholas watched her, a contented smile on his face.

"I had to retire from the Toronto PD several years ago because of health reasons. During a shoot-out I was severely wounded, shot in the chest and stomach. I nearly died."

"I heard about it. You saved many that night, including your partner Schanke, with your bravery. You were a hero." She looked up into his face. "You have a beautiful family, Nikola. You seem very happy."

"Yes, I am." Turning his face away from her, he stared into the wild heart of the fire. The crackling of the flames filled the gaping silence in the room.

Janette watched as the warm light from the logs illuminated the profile of the man she had known for so many dark centuries and then lost touch with when he chose mortality and the light. The sense of why he had come touched a part of her that she had thought unreachable and long buried.

"You've come, for unfinished business?"

"Yes. That's part of it. You and LaCroix were the only family I had for so long. I felt...maybe I was wrong, maybe I shouldn't have come...I'd better leave."

"No! Don't leave. I am glad you've come," her smile filled with honest warmth. "We are a part of you, too. Family." Her smile faded. "Your hands, they're too cold for a mortal. You're dying, Nikola. Does your family know?"

With a long sad sigh Nicholas pulled her hand to his chest, his blue eyes staring at a point far and distant.

"No, they don't. I've just come from my doctor. He tried to explain. Natalic will understand more than I. He told me it's hereditary,

originating from the part of France where I was born. Only the males get it, after middle age, a type of leukemia. There's no treatment, no cure. He said I have about six months."

"I'm so sorry." Concern was apparent in her voice.

"Janette, I don't mind about myself. The years I have had were good, and far more than I had expected, but...I'm worried about my son. The doctor said that he might..." A sob caught in Nicholas' throat, making him unable to speak further.

Janette rose to sit at his side, her arms encircling, comforting, as he struggled with his emotions. Nothing was said; there were no words that could be said.

A log, reduced by the fury of the flames, popped and shattered into minor pieces. The fragments danced and tumbled through the pile, finally joining the other embers at the bottom, glowing in their last brilliance.

"I came, Janette, looking for courage," Nicholas said in a more controlled voice. "Courage to go home and tell my family, and tell my son."

Janette hugged Nicholas closer, letting his head rest on her bosom. She planted a kiss on his forehead, and they continued sitting together, watching the fire fade.

The months passed in a slow but steady march of time and seasons.

For once the room was quiet. The usual hospital noises of beeps, clicks and voices were silent. Nicholas Knight drifted in and out of consciousness. The drugs that flowed through his veins effectively kept the agonizing pain at bay, but they made reality a distant and hazy thing. The nurse, his favorite, had already been in to clean and bathe him, making him comfortable for the night. Her humming a gentle tune while she worked with gentle efficiency and respect was why he liked her to care for him. Because he was more alert tonight, not fighting the fevered delirium of the past few nights, he was able to talk to her and thank her for her care. Now he waited, alone, with only the warm glow of the single nightlight keeping him company.

A cool hand touched his forehead. Without opening his eyes, he smiled. "LaCroix, you finally came. I thought you weren't going to make it in time," he said in a low, tired voice.

"Janette told me you had come to the Raven. Why did you want me to come? Why did you pull me here? The only thing I have to offer you is the one thing you don't want."

Opening his eyes, Nicholas looked up at the tall man dressed in black as he towered over the bed. "I wanted you to come...to say thank you and good-bye," he whispered.

LaCroix stood by the bed, his hand still touching Nicholas' brow. "You have a fever."

"My time is very short. I won't live through the night..."

"I know."

"I'm so very tired...would you stay with me? Until it's...over?"

"Where's your family? Where's dear Natalie? Shouldn't they be her for this?!" The agitation was clear in his voice.

"I sent them home. They needed the rest. They have been with me through all of this. It's been harder for them than it has been for me. They have to continue living. I promised that I would be here when they returned in the morning. I regret lying to them, but I wanted to be alone. I knew you wouldn't come with them here. Will you please stay with me?"

LaCroix pulled a chair closer to the side of Nicholas' bed. He sat, rigid, with arms folded across his chest. "What is it you want from me, Nicholas? I did what you asked. I let you go. Left you alone to pursue the life you wanted. There's no unfinished business between us. What else is there?"

"You gave me a gift all those centuries ago, LaCroix. Now, I want to give you one in return." Pausing to take a deep breath, Nicholas continued, "You fear your own death. All things must die eventually; even the sun will cease some day. I want to show you there's no reason to fear, no reason to be afraid. Only peace waits on the other side. No punishment, no retribution, just peace."

"Maybe for you, Nicholas! You have made your peace with eternity. You have paid your debt."

"Perhaps, LaCroix, but I want you to see, through me, that there's nothing to fear, even for you. Please, stay with me. My gift to you."

Slowly, with apparent great effort, Nicholas raised his hand off the bed and reached out to LaCroix. LaCroix sat staring at the thin, pale hand. His normal mask of sarcastic self-assurance was gone, replaced by the look of a frightened child.

"Please, LaCroix!" Nicholas pleaded, his voice a hollow whisper.

Slowly LaCroix, hand trembling, reached out and grasped Nicholas' upheld hand, their fingers intertwining. LaCroix's entire body shuddered with the feel of the contact.

"We fathers sometimes are forced to do heartbreaking things concerning our children. I had to tell my son that, because of me and the genetic legacy I've left him, he will not grow to a ripe old age." Nicholas stopped and took a long and deep breath. "Will you, LaCroix, sit with me and watch as I, your son, leave this world?"

Without saying a word, LaCroix nodded his head in acknowledgment.

"Thank you. I won't be keeping you long."

Nicholas pulled LaCroix's hand to his chest, holding it endearingly with both hands over his heart.

LaCroix could readily feel the subtle changes in the tempo of Nicholas' heartbeat. He realized that these were the same changes that he had caused, had reveled in, in so many of his victims. He now wanted to pull his hand free and escape into the sanctuary of the night. He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to feel, experience, the death of this one — his son.

Caught up in his own thoughts, LaCroix didn't notice as the nurse returned to check on the condition of her patient. Only when he heard Nicholas speaking did he realize they were not alone.

"I was waiting for him. He came. My Father."

The nurse looked at him, the tiny nightlight illuminating her puzzled face as she noted the apparent age difference between father and son.

"Nurse." Nicholas, drawing her attention to him, quietly spoke, "We have business to complete. Please, leave us alone."

Completely understanding what was truly behind his words, the nurse gave him a compassionate smile and gently patted him on his

shoulder before she left the room. She paused at the doorway to give a last glance at the scene behind her before moving out of view.

LaCroix watched as the nurse walked out of the room. He knew he still had time to cut and run, to get away from this and back to the freedom of his old life. He also knew, if he stayed, he would be changed forever, never to be the same man again.

LaCroix, sighing, glanced back and saw that Nicholas was watching him. Their eyes met and locked; he was trapped. There was no leaving. Surrendering, LaCroix leaned closer to the bed and whispered comfortingly, "I'm staying with you, Nicholas. No matter how long it takes. I will stay with you...until the end."





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